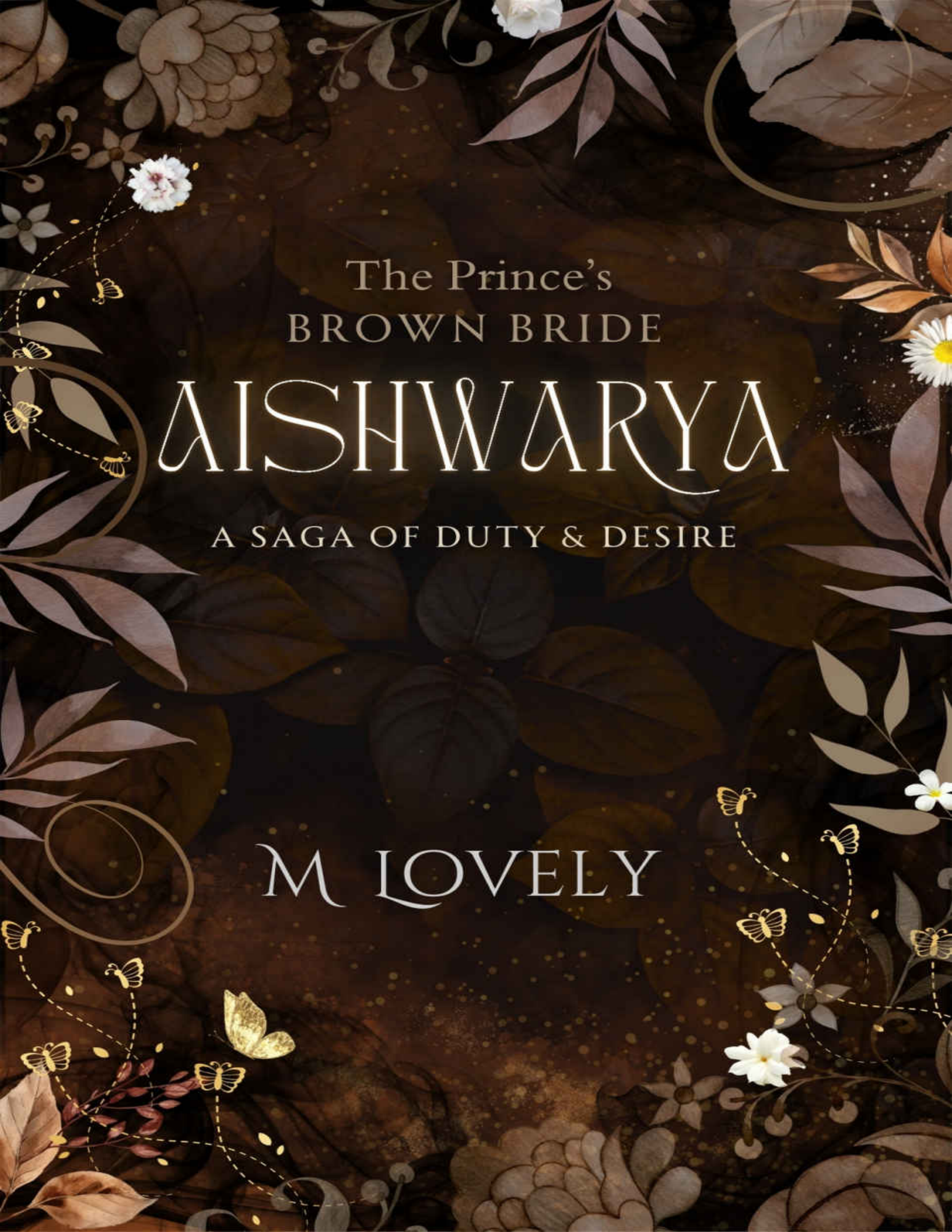




The Prince's
BROWN BRIDE

AISHWARYA

A SAGA OF DUTY & DESIRE

M LOVELY

Aishwarya

The Prince's Brown Bride

M Lovely

Ink and Spine Publishers

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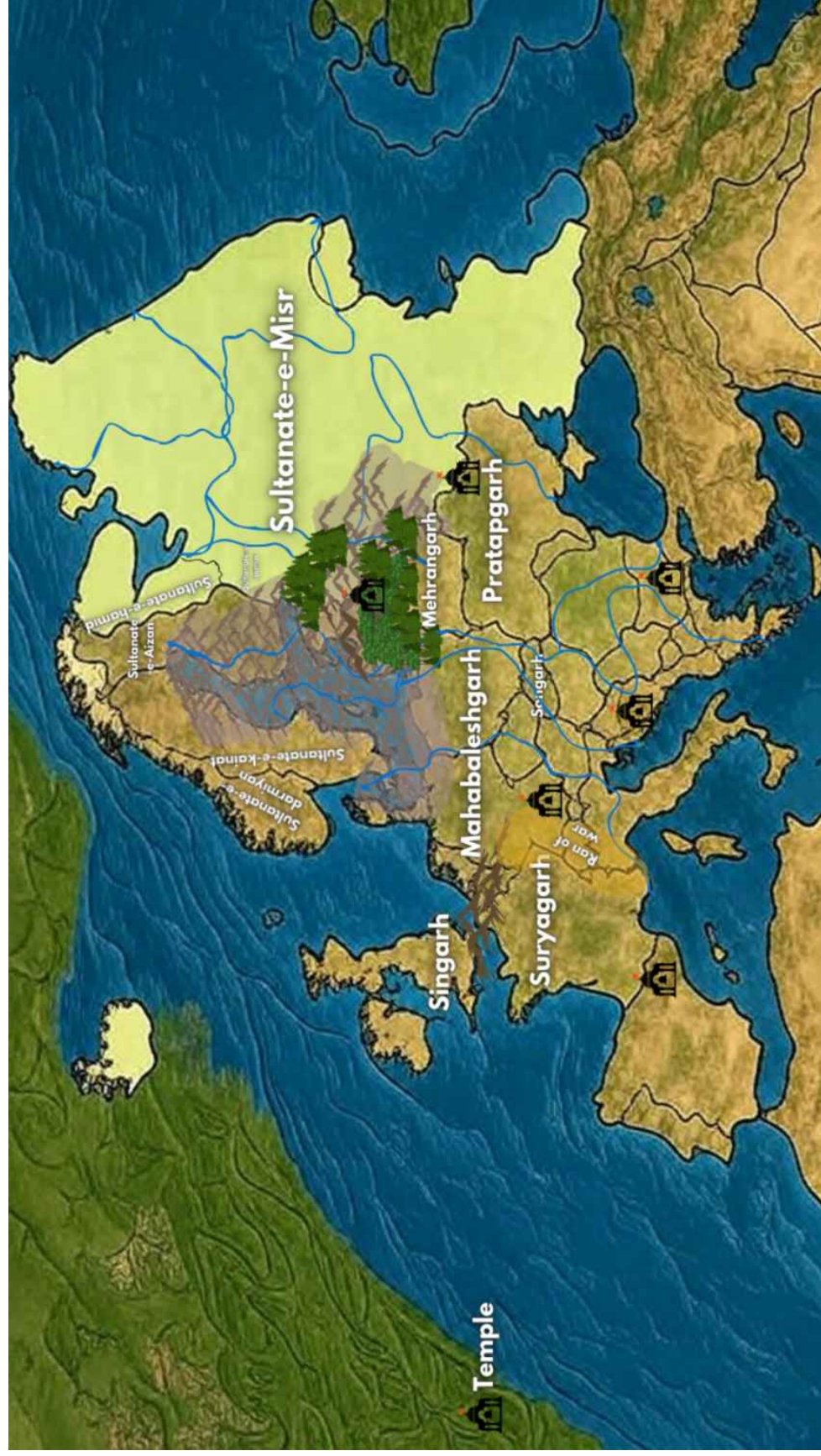
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To All The Dark Skinned Girls Who Doubt Themselves

And Later Sits On His Face.

Content Warnings!

Explicit Sexual Content

Arranged Marriage Without Consent

Parental Neglect

Emotional Distress

Cultural Gender Roles

Age/power Imbalance

Complexion Insecurity (High)

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1. Aishwarya

“Ab aap Bai-sa ki maang mein sindoor bhariye,”
(Now fill the vermilion in the princess’s hair
partition), the priest instructed him.

Silent tears rolled down my cheeks, hidden underneath the long veil I wore. My whole body shivered.

For an entire week, I hadn’t eaten properly, slept peacefully, or done anything to my heart’s content.

Closing my eyes, I pursed my trembling lips to calm myself when he gently lifted my veil, just enough to make room for his hand to reach my forehead.

My entire body went numb, and my eyes closed, the moment his hand reached the centre of my hairline, filling vermilion to the parting of my hair.

“Vivaah sampanna hua,” (The wedding has reached its sacred conclusion.)

This is it.

I became his.

In a single moment, my whole life, my world and everything had changed. So drastically. As if someone had fallen from the height of a mountain straight into the depths of the river flowing below. In just a snap of fingers. And no one could ever explain the moment one slips from the cliff and crashes into the riverbed within the snap. No one could explain that turbulence, that storm, that feeling.

No one.

I was married to a man I had never known, or seen, or even heard of.

For my entire life, I had craved love, longed for something real, yearned to feel important, and this was it. My hopes

died here. My longing ended here. My craving burned here. I ended here, before the sacred flames.

But, everything was already over the moment my father decided to marry me off to a stranger for the supposed betterment of the people. I was just a pawn in the political **Chaturanga** (chess).

“Ab aap dono uthkar apne badoan ke charan sparsh karein va unka aashirwaad lein,” (Now, both of you may rise and humbly seek the blessings from your elders.) the priest commanded, and I felt the person beside me, who had now become my husband, rise to his feet.

I remained frozen.

All the voices, all my childhood visions blurred through my teary eyes. I felt a hand on my shoulder, as a sweet, girlish voice said, “Aishwarya, stand up.”

As I blinked, more tears slipped down my cheeks.

Shakily, I stood and looked down at my dupatta tied to his.

I was now his wife. His half. His.

Yet I didn’t know who he was.

All I knew was that his name was Ranvijay Dev Singh, and he was a Prince of Suryagarh, the kingdom with which my father had recently established a peace treaty, giving me away as a token of alliance.

My knees wobbled as I made my way towards my father with weak, unsteady steps. He placed his hand on my head and said, “God bless you.”

I knew those words were merely a formality.

I was never the daughter he wanted; I was never the girl he expected to be. I didn’t know what was wrong with me, or what had been wrong all my life. And yet, he was all I had, even if his behaviour had always been cold toward me.

“Congratulations, Bhai-sa,” I heard a few faded voices of people congratulating, giggling, and the sounds of celebrations. But inside, my heart was burning to ashes.

Never had I imagined that my father would arrange my marriage to a stranger for the sake of politics.

A political alliance in which one must expect nothing and only perform their duty. And someone like me, who had longed for love day and night... just died here.

With slow steps, after receiving only a formal 'God bless you' from the only person I called family, I walked toward the waiting palanquin. I didn't know how many days I would live in that new home. And realising that this departure wasn't just a visit, but a forever one, sent a shiver down my spine.

My tears had begun to dry, leaving their trail down my cheeks, and my senses could no longer feel anything. My words could not describe what I was feeling. Just... nothing.

I sat in the palanquin. And my heart sank deeper and deeper as we began our journey toward Suryagarh, my supposed new home.

My trembling fingers traced the red wedding bangles on my wrists, feeling my world tear apart further and further.

I didn't know what to expect in that place. What to expect from my husband, or whether I should expect anything from him at all? I didn't know how he looked, how he spoke, how he behaved, what his past was like, what he thought of the future, or what he thought about me.

Does he know I have a dark complexion? Does he know how scared I am?

Thousands of questions filled my mind, caging me, suffocating me, killing me, throughout the journey until we finally reached Suryagarh.

"You may come out now, Princess Aishwarya," I heard the same sweet, girlish voice again.

Wiping away my tears, I stepped out of the palanquin.

As I adjusted my clothes, I felt a gentle hand on my shoulder.

"Come," the same girlish voice said. She led me to the front of the massive door, and I could sense my husband standing beside me.

“Welcome, Bhabhi-sa,” a manly voice caught my attention, but I didn’t respond. “I am Agastya, younger brother of Ranvijay Bhai-sa,” he said, and I just gulped nervously.

I didn’t know what to do, so I simply joined my hands and greeted him.

I was trying to feel normal, so that I could behave normally, despite the storm brewing inside me.

“Aishwarya, you have to kick the **Kalash** gently with your toes,” the same voice said, and I looked down at the small metallic pot filled with rice.

I held my skirt and lifted it slightly. Even with tears blurring my vision, I could clearly see my dark feet, mostly covered with red **Mehendi** and **Mehavar**, adorned with toe rings.

As I gently pushed the pot, the rice spilt onto the floor, and a wave of giggles echoed around me.

It made me even more nervous.

“Now step inside,” the girl said, and I noticed the huge plate filled with red liquid.

Lifting one leg, I placed it inside the plate, but just as I was about to step in, I lost my balance, and felt two hands clutching my arms, along with a gentle, manly voice. **“Sambhalkar.”** (Careful.)

Goosebumps rose on my neck. *That’s him.*

Holding myself, I placed my foot onto the plate and stepped forward. The cold red liquid beneath me sent a shiver down my spine, yet I continued walking.

My heart was racing wildly as I stepped into my new home. The one, which I wasn’t sure would ever truly be mine.

After all, four walls don’t make a home. It’s the freedom, happiness, warmth, and energy radiated by its people. And knowing how little importance I’d been given when they were deciding my fate, I could hardly believe this place would offer me any of that.

I kept walking alongside them, barely noticing the path beneath my feet. Because I knew there'd be plenty of time to learn it. I didn't even know exactly how I felt.

But something inside me, something close, was lost in every sense.

After a long walk, I climbed a few stairs, and someone informed me, "Princess Aishwarya, this is your chamber."

My breath stilled—*my chamber*.

It was all real.

I was far from home and utterly alone among strangers.

With trembling steps, I moved forward and stepped onto the cold marble floor. I lowered my eyes, and from the blurry view of my veil, I could just make out the deep maroon colour.

I felt a pair of hands gently guiding me toward the bed.

"You can uncover your veil now." I heard the same girlish voice again and lifted my eyes.

When I didn't react for a few moments, a pair of hands gently lifted my veil. I kept my lashes south, fidgeting with the edges of my bangles nervously.

"Aapka Suryagarh ke mahal mein swaagat hai, Choti Rani-sa," (You are most welcome in our palace, Choti Rani-sa.) I heard and lifted my gaze to see a beautiful young woman with a heartwarming smile looking at me.

She took a deep breath and sat beside me when I was finding it difficult to breathe through my anxiety.

In the blink of an eye, I raked my eyes around to find that the chamber was filled with women, with no men in sight.

"I am Nandani, your sister-in-law," she explained.

I joined my hands politely to greet her and bent to touch her feet. She immediately held my hands and shook her head. **"Ranvijay humare bhai jaise hain, aur aap humari keval devrani nahi, behen bhi hain. To charan sparsh na karein, seedha gale miliye,"** (Ranvijay is like my brother, and now you're not just my sister-in-law but my sister as well. So don't touch my feet,

just come in for a hug.) she said, leaning closer to embrace me in a hug.

A sense of comfort and peace ran through my body, prompting me to close my eyes. Pulling away, she said, "You must go and get freshened up. Everyone is waiting for you for the welcome prayers."

I blinked, nodding lightly. "Ji," I managed to say.

She stood up and added, "Also, Aishwarya, this is Moni. She's your helper. If you need anything, you can always tell her," she said, pointing to a girl dressed in attendants' clothes. "Obviously, except for the things only your husband can fulfil," she added with a teasing tone, and a shiver ran through my body as giggles erupted around the room. "You should go and get ready, I'll be back in some time. I need to check the arrangements and all."

I nodded and watched her leave, along with all the other ladies, leaving only a few attendants behind.

"Aapke snaan ka prabandh kardein?" (Shall we prepare the water for your bath?) Moni asked. I gave a slight nod and softly replied, "Ji."

She left, and I waited silently until she returned. She then led me to the bathing room, and I was stunned by its size and elegance. This palace was way grander than my own.

Moni and the other attendants helped me remove all my jewellery, bathe, and then dress again in a dark red outfit, adorned with the same jewellery.

She then tied my hair into a bun, and I glanced at my hands, which were deeply stained with **Mehendi** and **Mehavar**.

I was his wife now.

"You are ready?" My sister-in-law's voice jolted me out of my thoughts, and I stood up instantly from the chair, placing the veil over my head, "Ji,"

She took me outside, and I hid my face behind the veil, stepping out of the chamber. The fragrance of cinnamon

and roses hit my nose, and I immediately recognised who it was.

It was him, the man I had married, because I had remembered the same fragrance while sitting on the wedding altar.

“Let’s go,” he said gently, and I nodded, following suit.

We both walked down the galleries and reached a small temple-like structure, where we offered prayers to the deities as part of the rituals.

After we returned, I was informed that I had to eat something in the evening, and that was when my real anxiety began.

As darkness slowly spread through the palace, a strange flutter began rising in my stomach. The fear that he might not like me, my complexion, or anything about me, made me tremble.

“Come here,” my sister-in-law said, guiding me from the courtyard into the bedroom.

The moment my eyes fell on the bed, decorated with rose petals and covered with curtains of fresh flowers, my heart skipped a beat. Nervousness and dread began to rise in my chest.

“Time for your wedding night,” she said with a smile and excitement, and I immediately lowered my gaze.

What the hell?

I hadn’t even seen my husband. He hadn’t seen me either. My gut twisted with unbearable tension. And, we would sleep together?

She helped me sit on the bed, and I realised my whole body was shaking. “Now, you must wait for him,” she whispered before leaving, and I watched as they all walked out, one by one.

I tried to focus on my breathing, sitting frozen like a statue on the bed of roses, in the silence of the night...waiting for my husband.

And after what felt like an eternity, I heard the door slowly creak open, and my heartbeat thundered inside my chest, making me feel anxious and scared, all at once.

I heard the slow, faded sound of footsteps approaching. I couldn't see anything because of the veil, but I felt him taking a seat on the bed.

My heart throbbed wildly inside my chest.

"Aishwarya," I heard a strong, heavy voice.

My fingers trembled, and my palms turned sweaty.

"Let me tell you your duties first," he said, and I inhaled deeply to listen carefully. "You will have to wake up very early in the morning, before anyone else. Then, you will get ready and head to the kitchen to cook something for me. I want my breakfast in bed. As the chief advisor in the royal court and my brother's right-hand man, I have many responsibilities. I love discipline, my work and peace, above all. After breakfast, you'll prepare my bath and help me get ready for court. While I'll be in my court meetings, you'll finish all the chores. I don't like attendants touching my things, so you must do everything on your own. Then, you will cook my lunch, and later on, you will water my plants and feed the sparrows. After that, you will cook dinner and feed me with your hands, because I get pretty exhausted from the day's work. And at night, you'll have to massage my head, shoulders, and legs,"

Tears welled up in my eyes, hearing the long list of duties I was expected to perform for him every day. My heart felt heavy, crushed beneath the weight of his demands.

"Is that clear?" he asked in an authoritative tone, and I shivered terribly.

"Ji," I somehow managed to say.

"Oh God," Suddenly, I heard, "Bhai-sa, it's hurting!" The same commanding voice turned into a cry, and another deep yet soothing voice responded. "What are you doing in my chamber, Agastya?"

I furrowed my brow.

Agastya. The younger brother. I remembered.

"Bhai-sa, I just came to see Bhabhi-sa... let go of my ear, please!" he cried further, and a small smile crept onto my face, realising everything that had been said before was just a jest.

"Leave right now!" he said, and I heard his voice again.

"What? Bhai-sa, it's not even a day since Bhabhi-sa arrived, and you're already asking me to leave?" he said dramatically in an exaggerated and sorrowful tone. "Leave, Agastya,"

"Okay, okay, I'm leaving, Bhai-sa," I heard him cry out with a fake voice, and then the sound of their slow, retreating footsteps toward the door.

The doors closed, and I heard footsteps walking back towards me.

I felt nervous again, and the smile that had just formed vanished instantly.

I felt him sitting in front of me, and he said, "I am sorry about whatever Agastya said. He is the youngest of us and has been pampered a lot since childhood."

I lowered my gaze and didn't say anything.

My eyes stared at my feet. That was all I could see through the veil while keeping my gaze low.

Suddenly, I felt his hand moving closer, and I shut my eyes tightly.

My heartbeat raced extremely, and my breathing turned uneven. Time seemed to slow down, and with my eyes still closed, I expected my veil to be undone. But...but it didn't happen.

With shaken breaths, I slowly opened my eyes.

I thought he would lift my veil. Instead, he did something that shook me deeply and brought tears to my eyes.

He gently touched both his palms to my feet and, leaning in, softly pecked my toes. A strong shiver ran down my spine, and I immediately pulled back my feet.

A lone tear slipped from my eye with that gesture. I balled my fists onto my skirt when he spoke, ***“Humaare jeevan mein aapka swagat hai, Aishwarya.”*** (Welcome to my life, Aishwarya.) My heart swelled with emotion, and a sudden heaviness pressed against my chest.

Slowly, I reached out and touched his hand lightly with the tips of my fingers, feeling uneasy from the weight of him touching my feet.

He gently pulled his hand back and asked, “Do you like the place?”

I gulped, trying to steady my emotions, and nodded. “Ji,” I answered softly, my voice barely more than a breath.

There was a pause, a little awkward silence, before he calmly asked, “What is your age, by the way?”

I blinked, then a light smile formed beneath my veil as I realised he was just as nervous as I was. “Nineteen,” I managed to say.

“Oh, nineteen. You’re so young,” he replied. “I’m twenty-five,” and I smiled quietly in my veil.

Silence followed again for a moment. As I nervously traced the bangles on my wrists, their soft clink resonated in the hushed room.

“Has this wedding happened with your consent?” he asked, and I immediately lowered my gaze.

Consent.

The word felt familiar...yet so foreign.

I was informed of the marriage only a week before it was about to happen.

That was the kind of ‘consent’ I had been given.

“No,” I said, quietly shaking my head.

A few moments of silence filled the space between us.

And then he spoke, his voice calm and genuine. “I’m sorry. But I hope you’ll find happiness here. Or... if you ever feel like you want to leave...you wholeheartedly can.”

I inhaled deeply at his words, and another tear escaped my eyes.

“By the way, have you had dinner?” he asked suddenly.

I nodded slowly. “Ji.”

“Okay,” he said, then stood up from the bed. “You just be... comfortable here, and I’ll sleep on the couch,” he added, taking a pillow from the bed.

He opened the curtains surrounding the bed and drew them apart.

Now, I was alone inside the flowery enclosure, surrounded by curtains. A slight smile crept to my lips, though I didn’t know why exactly.

I lifted my veil and looked at the delicate curtains encircling the bed.

Lying back slowly, I rested my head on the pillow and relaxed into the soft mattress. The scent of fresh flowers lingered in the air, and for the first time since I arrived, it felt... beautiful.

Strangely, I didn’t miss my only family anymore.

Exhausted after so many restless days, I eventually closed my eyes and didn’t even realise when sleep took over me.



I woke up feeling as if I had slept for an eternity. Stretching my arms, I slowly opened my eyes. My bangles tingled.

It seemed that no one had entered the chamber. The curtains were still closed.

I sat up, pushing the covers aside to peek through. Parting the curtains, I placed the veil over my head and pulled it low enough to hide my face before stepping down from the bed.

As I lifted the curtain slightly and looked around the chamber, my gaze fell on a large window.

To my surprise, it was early morning. My eyes then drifted to the couch...There, I saw him sleeping. His face was turned to the other side.

Seeing him lying there, stirred something in me. I adjusted my veil and quietly settled it more securely over my head.

Unintentionally, my eyes scanned the room.

The dark maroon floors, ceiling-high windows with long curtains, and grand couches were arranged perfectly. The round ceiling was decorated with intricate floral designs. The walls featured ornate lamp stands.

It was a grand chamber, well connected to a bathing room and a courtyard that opened out into the garden.

With slow, careful steps, I walked towards him.

There was a curiosity building in me...a longing to see him.

The soft chime of my anklets echoed throughout the room with every step, and I tried my best to move quietly.

As I neared him, I maintained a cautious distance but leaned just enough to catch a glimpse of his face.

And in that moment, my heart skipped several beats.

He was the handsomest man I had ever seen.

His hair fell across his forehead, lashes long and dark, and his brows beautifully shaped. His lips were full, and he had a sharp jawline. He was tall and well-built; everything about him was striking.

And me?

I was nothing like that.

We were opposites.

A wave of discomfort passed through me.

Suddenly, he inhaled deeply and shifted slightly in his sleep. Startled, I quickly took a few steps back, pulled my veil lower, and turned my face away.

My heart began racing wildly and uncontrollably. I closed my eyes, willing myself to calm down.

Thankfully, he was still sleeping.

I slowly walked back to the bed and sat again.

But after seeing him, a different kind of fear bubbled inside me.

He looked like the kind of man who might expect his wife to be beautiful, fair, and flawless; someone of high standards.

My fingers unknowingly began tracing the edges of my bangles as I lay on the bed, tangled in a storm of thoughts.

What if he never liked me? What if he rejected me the moment he saw me? How would he react? What would he think?

Thousands of questions raced through my mind, getting me anxious, each one prickling my skin with goosebumps. I was more frightened than I had ever been.

But...he filled the vermilion in the partition of my hair. Maybe he had seen me then. Or perhaps he hadn't.

A man who didn't even try to see his wife on their wedding night. What did that mean? What were his expectations of me...of this marriage?

As the flood of thoughts overwhelmed me, I abruptly sat up in bed. My breathing turned heavy and erratic.

What if he sent me back? What if he rejected me completely?

I was nothing compared to him.

His brother had said he was the chief advisor in the royal court, the king's right-hand man. He was surely wise, learned, and thoughtful. I, on the other hand, had none of it.

And I...I had never even been interested in learning.

My fingers reached my lips as I bit my nails anxiously, thinking of all the things he would surely dislike about me.

First, I wasn't beautiful, not even close to him. I wasn't educated, nor well-read. I knew nothing that mattered to a man like him.

My entire life was spent listening to my father's scoldings and helping my elder sisters. Being the youngest daughter without a mother shaped me into someone who never dreamed, never asked questions, but only obeyed.

I had spent my entire life trying to make my father and sisters happy, even though I had no interest in what they

wanted from me.

The chores. The etiquette. The softness and silence expected from a woman, the fine skills in stitching, cooking, and the demureness required of a wife.

I had learned it all.

But what if he expected more? What if he wanted someone educated? Someone capable of supporting him in political matters?

Just imagining it sent a sharp shiver down my spine.

I rose from the bed immediately. I had to keep my distance from him.

He should not see me. He should not learn the truth about me. He should never know that I was nothing more than a girl who had always served others.

I wasn't even close to what he deserved.

And yet, the way he had behaved last night, the way he touched my feet... kissed them.

Oh, dear God!

I wasn't expecting that. I wasn't expecting so much good.

I hadn't seen it coming. Certainly not something so kind, so warm. It was more than I thought I deserved. The weight of his gesture pressed down on me, filling my chest with both awe and fear.

I tiptoed away from the bed and made my way toward the bathing chamber. It was morning. I had to attend to my morning routine and take a bath.

All covered with similar thoughts, I took a bath and changed into a fresh pair of orange and red attire. All my trunks and belongings had already arrived here the day before.

After taking a bath, I stepped into the dressing room, which was adjacent to the bathing chamber.

I was slowly exploring the palace's beauty.

The dressing room featured a grand mirror set into a carved wooden frame, accompanied by a wide dressing table and a velvet-padded settee placed before it.

There were trunks full of clothes and boxes of jewellery lined up neatly. I ambled toward the mirror and looked at myself.

My wet, open hair, flowing past my hips, clung to my skin. Curly strands were dancing softly at the sides of my face.

Reaching forward, my fingers inched toward the untouched boxes of jewellery.

But I stopped midway.

My mind was resisting, telling me I shouldn't.

I was a newlywed bride. I should behave with dignity and grace. I shouldn't seem too eager.

I took a deep breath and looked at myself again.

As always, I looked normal. Not beautiful. Not extraordinary. Just... me.

The bottle of vermilion caught my attention.

Taking a pinch, I parted my hair gently and applied it to the centre. The red line stood vivid against my scalp.

My jewellery pieces were still intact from the wedding night, as I hadn't taken them off.

I picked up my dupatta and settled it gently over my head, pulling it low enough to cover my face again.

Suddenly, the sound of someone clearing their throat made me shiver. I immediately pulled my veil lower and turned slightly, hiding as much of my face as I could.

It was him.

Hearing his footsteps slowly approaching me felt like time itself was slowing down.

No one else was around. I was alone. And the closer he came, the more the fear inside me intensified.

If he spoke...I would have to answer.

But what would I say?

He stopped before me, and it felt like the space was closing in. Just his proximity made my palms sweat and my throat go dry.

“Wo...vivaah ke pashchaat, muh-dikhai par patni ko upahaar ke roop mein kuch dena hota hai,”

(Actually...after the wedding, the husband is supposed to give something as a gift to his wife.) he said softly.

His deep yet warm morning voice sent a strange shiver down my spine. I blinked, and through my veil, I saw him hold out his hand. A ring lay in his palm.

My heart began to race.

A ring... for me?

Though nervous, I somehow found the courage to extend my hand.

After a momentary silence and a pause, he placed the ring gently in my palm. "Thank you," I managed to whisper.

He didn't respond. Just watched.

With slightly trembling fingers, I slipped the ring onto my finger, removing an extra one to make space, aware all the while that his eyes were on my hands.

Then he said, "You should have called the attendants to help you get ready."

I gulped and blinked, feeling his words touch something deeper. How could I explain to him that I had always been the one helping my sisters dress up like attendants?

Getting dressed by someone else... it didn't feel right to me. It never had.

I hesitated for a few moments, trying to find the right words. "I didn't want to disturb anyone so early in the morning," I finally said. My voice was low and hesitant.

He took a small step forward. "Oh."

I immediately stepped back. He quickly mirrored me, taking a step back as well. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you. I just... wanted this ring to wear," he said, reaching for a ring on the dressing table.

He smelled fresh, like he had already bathed and gotten ready. I slowly stepped back again, lowering my gaze.

"Princess," a voice interrupted us.

It was Moni.

"Ji," I answered quietly.

"Badi-maa has come to meet you."

I furrowed my brow in slight confusion.

Before I could respond, he added gently, "Badi-maa is our aunt. A mother figure to us. We should meet her to take her blessings."

I nodded and softly replied, "Ji."

Inhaling deeply, still nervous, I turned on my feet and began walking slowly, taking measured steps just behind him. My anklets were too loud, and with all the jewellery adorning my body, I sounded like a walking trinket box.

He must have sensed my discomfort as he slowed down, allowing me to walk beside him.

I closed my eyes for a moment and gathered my courage to match his pace.

We both walked out of the chamber, and suddenly, in a low voice, he asked, "How can you see through the veil?"

A wave of uneasiness churned in my stomach. His words made me nervous all over again.

What should I say?

Was he uncomfortable with the veil? Was he concerned? Did he want to see my face?

Hundreds of thoughts ran through my mind, but despite that, I couldn't decide what to answer. My silence made him stay quiet afterwards.

He didn't ask again. And then, I heard an aged woman's soft voice. "Ranvijay,"

We walked closer to her, and in a gentle voice, he said, "Aishwarya, this is our Badi-maa. And Badi-maa, she is Aishwarya."

I stepped forward and bent down to touch her feet. She placed her hand gently on my head and held my shoulder to bring me up.

"God bless you," she said warmly, reaching for the hem of my veil.

My heartbeat surged as she slowly lifted it.

I immediately lowered my gaze. My heart was pounding so loudly, I could hear it. My breathing turned shallow, and I

froze in place.

“Beautiful,” she said after a long pause.

And nothing could make me more nervous, more frightened, than feeling his eyes on me.

I couldn't lift my gaze. My lashes stayed down, burdened by the fear.

It felt like everything in me was holding still, craving just one word, one sign from him that he... liked me. That he didn't mind my complexion or my face.

“Ghoonghat oadhne ki aawashyakta nahi hai. Humaari bahuein humaari putri samaan hain,” (You don't have to stay in the veil. Our daughters-in-law are like our daughters.) Her voice brought me back to the moment.

She gently placed the dupatta back on my head, and I blinked nervously, still keeping my eyes low.

And then I heard another familiar voice. **“Hatiye, Devar-sa, ab nihaarna band kijiye. Humein humaari devrani se baat karne dijiye.”** (Move aside, Devar-sa, stop staring now and let me talk to my sister-in-law.) My sister-in-law teased.

She came closer, placed her hand on my shoulder, and leaned in near my ear. “I hope your husband didn't trouble you too much last night, Aishwarya,” she whispered with a mischievous smile.

Everyone laughed, and my cheeks turned warm instantly.

I felt like melting from the sheer embarrassment.

“Hato bhi, Nandani. Humaari nav-vadhu ko yun tang na karo,” (Move aside, Nandani. Don't tease our new daughter-in-law.) Badi-maa moved my sister-in-law aside and gently held my shoulder, guiding me toward a space where a wide, open metallic vessel filled with milk was placed in the centre, surrounded by soft cushions on the floor.

She made me sit on one of the cushions and then sat beside me. I placed my hands quietly on my lap, my gaze still lowered.

“Ranvijay, you sit there,” she said to him.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him taking a seat directly across from me. Between us sat the milk-filled vessel, gleaming under the golden morning light.

All the women gathered around us in a cheerful semicircle.

I noticed my sister-in-law now sitting on my other side as Badi-maa began to explain. “So, I will put this ring in the vessel, and you both have to find it. Whoever finds the ring first is supposed to dominate the other in the future,” she instructed with a light tone.

I lifted my eyelashes slightly to sneak a glance at him. But just as my gaze met his, I quickly lowered it again.

My heart was pounding against my chest like a drum.

I closed my eyes for a brief second to calm the storm inside me.

When I dared to lift my gaze again, I caught him stealing glances at me. And that was enough to send my pulse racing faster.

He had seen me now. My face, my true self. What was he thinking? Did he like me? Was he upset?

“Ready, Aishwarya?” Badi-maa’s voice gently pulled me back.

I gave a slight nod and replied softly, “Ji, Badi-maa.” She smiled kindly at me, then turned to him. “Ready, Ranvijay?”

He looked slightly flustered but nodded, replying in a soft tone, “Ji, Badi-maa.”

“Okay, so I’m putting the ring into the vessel,” she announced with cheer.

I kept my gaze low, still watching her hand, not daring to glance at him, even though he sat right in front of me. Less than a metre between us... Yet it felt like miles.

As Badi-maa dropped the ring into the vessel and swirled her hand to let it sink into the milk, I felt his gaze on me again.

I blinked nervously, lowering my eyes.

“Now you both go,” she said.

I was hesitant and unsure, and so I waited, hoping he would go first. But he didn’t move.

He was still looking at me.

My heart felt like it might burst.

Time passed in the thick silence. Every moment feels like an eternity.

“Why are you not putting your hands in?” My sister-in-law asked with a playful pout. She held my wrist and guided my hand into the vessel.

At the exact moment, he, too, dipped his hand into the milk.

Around us, soft laughter and playful applause rang through the air.

I raked my fingers gently through the milk. It was at a normal temperature, but my insides were anything but normal. I started searching for the ring carefully, deeply afraid that my hand might brush against his by mistake.

He was keeping his distance too, just moving his hand lightly, as if that was just for formality.

A small part of me felt disappointed, seeing him so uninterested in the post-wedding ritual.

“Move forward, Aishwarya,” my sister-in-law nudged me playfully.

And suddenly, my hand touched his.

A jolt shot down my spine. I immediately recoiled, pulling my hand back, and lowered my gaze at once, flustered.

“Devar-sa, if you both continue shying like this, I bet we’ll have to wait for eternity to see either of you find the ring.” She teased him, and though his face remained unreadable, I caught a faint blush rising on his cheeks.

And just then, another voice echoed across the hall. “Bhabhi-sa, I think I should take part rather than Ranvijay Bhai-sa,” Agastya’s playful voice filled the room as he walked in, settling himself beside my husband.

He shot Agastya Devar-sa a glare.

Suddenly, a deeper, commanding voice entered the air. "What is happening?"

Startled, I turned to see his elder brother walking into the hall with calm authority.

"Ranaji, we're just telling this newlywed couple to show some enthusiasm in the rituals," my sister-in-law said, grinning.

He let out a soft chuckle. "Not everyone is enthusiastic about everything like you, Nandani," he replied, settling beside them.

She made a mock-offended face that made me smile faintly before turning my head slightly to see him better. "But it's post-wedding rituals," she pouted.

Ranaji smiled and patted my husband's shoulder. ***"Hum purhsoan ki maan-maryaada ka prashn hai, Ranvijay. Anguthi to khojni hi hogi."*** (It's about the pride of men, Ranvijay. You've to find the ring.)

He hesitated. "But, Bhai-s—"

"No ifs, no buts. I'm sure with Nandani's company, Aishwarya will soon become like her. And if you want to win future arguments, you'd better find that ring," Ranaji teased, making everyone around us burst into laughter. "Come on, man," he added, giving his shoulder an assuring pat.

He finally nodded, with a faint smile. "Ji, Bhai-sa," and brought his gaze back to the vessel.

I looked at my sister-in-law, who leaned in toward me and whispered in a low voice, "Did you hear, Aishwarya? You have to do it."

I nodded slightly in response.

Then she leaned in again, this time whispering something that made my eyebrows draw together in surprise. "And after finding the ring, throw the milk of the vessel right at his face," she said with a mischief-filled grin.

I turned to her, confused. "But, Jiji—"

“Shhh, just do as I say. It’s a good omen,” she insisted, still smiling. I brought my gaze back to the vessel. “Now, go,” she said again, and I put my hand forward.

So, now not only did I have to find the ring, but I also had to throw the milk from the vessel right on his face?

I moved my hand deeper into the vessel, and we both began actively searching for the ring.

“Bhai-sa will win, I know,” Agastya said, and I inhaled a deep breath.

Aishwarya, you can do this, I reminded myself.

My hand accidentally touched his. And at the exact moment, my finger brushed against the ring.

He immediately lifted his eyes to meet mine, and I looked at him too.

His finger touched the ring as well.

I instantly tightened my grip on it, and his fingers tightened around mine.

He stared at me with a sharp gaze, almost warning me to let go. But I held his gaze.

And in that moment, as our eyes locked, refusing to look away, I felt butterflies fluttering wildly in my stomach.

It was all so sudden... and strange.

I dropped my gaze and let go of the ring. He too loosened his hold on mine.

The moment I felt him withdraw his hand slightly, perhaps out of hesitation, I grabbed the ring and pulled it out.

Everyone cheered. And before anyone could fully register what had just happened, I held the vessel by its edges and threw the milk at him.

“Whoa!!!” My sister-in-law jumped with joy, and everyone burst into laughter.

I looked at all three men, soaked in milk, and my husband sat there, wide-eyed in disbelief.

“Bhabhi-sa!” Agastya screamed.

Ranaji pointed out, “It was all Nandani’s idea.”

He stood up, picked up a pot of water from the corner, and before anyone could take cover, he splashed it right on my sister-in-law's face.

"Urgh!" she coughed, standing frozen, drenched head to toe in water.

I couldn't help but laugh a little.

"Take it, Bhai-sa!" Agastya said, handing my husband a pot of water. "Bhai-sa."

He looked at me while holding the pot. And in that exact moment, I realised what was about to happen.

I just stared at him staring at me.

For a heartbeat, time stopped.

I lowered my gaze, foolishly hoping he wouldn't do it.

But then the splash of water hit me, and I stood there completely drenched.

My breath caught, and my heartbeat raced like mad.

I lifted my gaze to look at him, and a slight smirk played on his lips.

Oh my God!!!

I looked at my sister-in-law, who now held another pot in her hands.

Ranaji immediately started running away. "Nandani, don't you dare!" he warned, but she ran after him and splashed another pot of water at him.

I laughed softly, watching them.

"Aishwarya," I heard Badi Maa's voice, and I turned to look at her. As I found her eyes gently fixed on me, my laughter faded at once. "After such a long time, I've seen this hall come alive like this again, especially Ranvijay," she said.

I blinked nervously, not fully grasping what she meant, but she simply smiled.

More laughter caught my attention as Ranaji held my sister-in-law's hand as he emptied yet another pot of water on her. I couldn't help but chuckle.

Badi-ma spoke again, "Now, you both should get changed before you catch a cold." I lowered my gaze and nodded. "Ji."

I saw him walking inside already, and without thinking, I turned my feet to follow him.

With slow steps, I walked into the chamber after him. My wet feet were leaving prints on the floor. My gaze shamelessly lingered on the marks of his footsteps.

With my next step, I noticed the imprint of my feet fall right beside his, and without meaning to, my mind compared the sizes.

Mine was barely half the size of his. A slight shiver ran down my spine, yet a soft, invisible smile lingered on my lips, still caught up in everything that had just happened.

Honestly, I hadn't expected him to throw water at me like that.

It made my heart race so wildly. And the way he kept stealing glances at me... it stirred butterflies deep in my stomach.

But...did he like me?

I walked further in without realising it until I noticed his footprints fading into the bathroom.

I stopped right there.

Turning my head, I walked back toward the couch.

What the hell is happening to me?

I thought of waiting until he came back.

But I only needed to change. My clothes were soaked in water, not milk.

I could go to the dressing room... right?

Feeling ridiculous for hesitating, I turned and headed toward the dressing room.

I didn't know why, but it felt like I was being drawn forward by the trail of his presence.

I stepped inside and closed the door behind me.

Walking toward the trunks, I pulled out a fresh set of clothes and made my way to the mirror. Unpinning my

dupatta, I lowered it gently and set it aside on the chair.

Reaching for the cotton towel, I began drying myself with soft motions.

Once I was dry enough, I untied the threads of my skirt and slipped it down.

Taking a beautiful, bright yellow lehenga, I stepped into it and tied it neatly around my waist. Then my hands moved to the blouse. I undid the strings slowly. Sliding it down my arms, I set it aside and picked up the matching yellow blouse from the outfit.

I slipped my arms into it and adjusted it over my chest, reaching behind to tie the knot.

But just as I was about to fasten it, the door suddenly swung open, causing a violent shiver to run through me. I froze.

I immediately crossed my arms over my chest and turned, pressing my bare back against the mirror in panic.

My eyes widened, and my breath caught in my throat.

I trembled when I saw him holding the handle, his eyes wide in shock.

His bare upper body glistened faintly after bathing, and only a white cotton cloth covered his lower half.

Oh. My. God.

His eyes met mine for a moment, then he turned his face away sharply. "I... I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," he stammered, his voice flustered. "I didn't mean to scare you. I didn't know you were here."

I couldn't speak. My eyes lingered on his sculpted back. A blush spread across my cheeks before I could stop it.

He turned slightly, still avoiding my gaze, and shut the door again.

I let out a deep breath, still shaken, and turned slowly back to face the mirror.

What the hell just happened?

I tried to tie the strings, but my fingers were trembling. My cheeks had turned a dark shade of red, and I didn't know

what to do.

Did he see me? Did he... see my bare back?

I took a shaky breath, trying to calm myself down, and focused on the strings of my blouse, but there were so many.

It was a three-string blouse, and my hands couldn't make sense of which one needed to go where.

My fingers kept grabbing all at once.

I let out a sigh of frustration.

Who do I call now? I bit my lower lip, thinking.

He must be sitting in the bedroom. And if I needed to call someone, I would have to walk through the bedroom to get help.

And even outside... everyone was still around. I was stuck in a terribly awkward situation.

I waited a little longer and tried again. My hands trembled more, and I was tired, yet the strings refused to cooperate. "You're finished, Aishwarya," I muttered to myself.

I had no other option.

I'd have to step out... and ask him to call someone.

Taking a deep breath, I grabbed my dupatta, wrapped it securely around myself, including my head, and walked to the door.

I opened it just a little, just enough to peek outside.

He was sitting on the couch.

I quickly shut the door again and took another deep breath, bracing myself.

My heart was racing. My cheeks burned. I felt unbearably timid.

"Sunie..." (Listen...) I whispered, barely audible, and waited for a response.

Nothing.

Maybe my voice was too soft.

This time, I tried a little louder, **"Sunie..."**

Still no response.

Maybe the thick door and walls muffled my voice.

Gathering every bit of courage, I opened the door just a little wider and said again, this time clearly, ***“Sunie,”***

He heard me, and his head turned instantly toward me; he stood up at once. ***“Ji, kahiye,”*** (Yes, what happened?)

I sucked my lower lip and swallowed nervously. “Can you please call someone from outside?” I asked quietly.

He nodded without hesitation. “Ji.”

He clapped twice, and Moni came in almost immediately.

“Ji, Kunwar-sa?” she asked.

He gestured toward me. “She’s asking for you.”

Moni walked toward me, and I opened the door just enough to let her in before closing it quickly behind her.

“Ji, Bai-sa?” she asked gently.

I lowered my dupatta, revealing the half-tied blouse. “Can you please help me tie these strings?” I asked softly.

She smiled kindly. “Yes, of course,”

While tying the knot of my blouse, Moni suddenly spoke. “Bai-sa, can I ask you something? Please don’t be offended?”

I smiled gently and nodded. ***“Ji, poochiye,”*** (Yes, ask me.)

I felt her fingers working deftly, doing the last knot, as she continued. “All newlywed brides long to steal a few moments with their husbands, especially when their husband is someone like Prince Ranvijay. Why didn’t you ask him to do this for you? You could’ve had a chance to talk to him.”

I fell silent, her words hitting too close to my heart. How could I tell her I was afraid of rejection?

Yes, he was a handsome and beautiful man, but just by looking at him, I felt like I didn’t belong with him at all. “I don’t know... I’m afraid he doesn’t like me,” I said slowly, my voice barely a whisper.

Moni simply said, “Oh...”

And in that silence, I felt the last knot tied perfectly. I turned to her, murmuring a soft thank you. She smiled

warmly. "Let me dry your hair, Bai-sa,"

I shook my head quickly. "No, he's sitting outside, waiting to change. I should go out,"

She nodded in understanding.

I wrapped my dupatta over my head, pulling it low to cover my hairline. The less I revealed, the better.

With my heart racing and my breath shallow, I walked to the door and opened it.

Stepping out of the dressing room and into the bedroom, I felt every beat of my heart echo through my chest. Whatever had happened between us earlier made my cheeks burn, and I felt utterly foolish.

Timidly, I stole a glance at him.

He stood up from the couch, and at the sight of him half-naked, I immediately lowered my gaze.

"Uhhh, I should go inside," he said quickly, hastening toward the dressing room.

"Aishwarya..." Suddenly, Badi-maa's voice filled the room.

I turned and saw her walking in, accompanied by a few other ladies.

As I took slow steps toward her, the sound of my heavy anklets echoed softly in the chamber. **"Badi-maa, baithiye na,"** (Badi-ma, please sit down.)

She smiled and took her place on the couch. "Come here," she beckoned me, stretching her hand out to pull me gently beside her.

I inhaled deeply, settling next to her. "Ji," I said, meeting her eyes.

Her face shifted slightly, becoming more serious, and she blinked slowly. **"Ab aapse kya chupana, Aishwarya? Ab to aap kulvadhu hain humaari."** (Now there's no need for any secrets, Aishwarya. You are the daughter-in-law of this palace now.) she said, and my eyes reflected a quiet confusion.

She inhaled deeply, as though steadying herself.

“Ranvijay lost his parents at an age when children don’t even understand what loss means. Since then, the three brothers have carved their paths. Rudra, the eldest, has Nandani. They love each other deeply, and Nandani completes him. Then there’s Agastya, a free soul. What’s in his heart is visible on his face. He’s transparent, fearless, and speaks his mind without shame.”

Her voice softened as she continued, “But Ranvijay... unlike both his brothers, he is introverted, calm, and secretive. We never know what he’s feeling, thinking, or even planning. He always appears content and agreeable. Supportive of both his brothers... always. But none of us truly knows what sorrow he carries inside. No one knows how he felt after losing his parents, what his thoughts were.”

I swallowed hard as her words wrapped tightly around my heart. A strange ache bloomed inside me. I blinked nervously because, somewhere deep down, I, too, had lived like that all my life.

“But now that he is married,” she said, her tone turning hopeful, “I pray you can open his heart. Please take the time to get to know him... really know him. Because no matter how perfect or peaceful we may seem on the surface, there should always be one person in the world who knows us like the back of their hand. There must be transparency between the two of you. And I will always be indebted to you if you could love my child and open his heart. We are truly concerned that there must be something he conceals in his heart from the whole world,”

She reached forward and cradled my hand in both of hers. “Please, Aishwarya. I know this is a political marriage. And you’re still in that delicate phase of life where things don’t always make sense yet. But I’m afraid he may never take the first step. You may have to do it for the sake of this relationship. And for him.”

There was something in her eyes that I couldn't quite put my finger on. Sadness? Exhaustion? Or perhaps her experience.

"All this," she added with a faint smile, "is just advice from a woman who understood everything far too late in her own life."

I watched as a single tear rolled down her cheek. My throat tightened, and I nodded. "I will try, Badi-maa... I will try." I muttered, my voice barely audible.

But inside, my heart was trembling. My mind was churning.

How could I do that when I didn't even know if he liked me? What if he didn't want me to talk to him? What if he didn't like me at all?

I took a long breath to steady myself.

She leaned in and pressed a soft kiss to my forehead. "God bless you, my child."

I smiled weakly. She stood up, and I quickly rose as well, walking with her to the chamber door to see her off.

But just as she reached it, she suddenly paused. "I almost forgot the reason I came here!" she chuckled.

I smiled instinctively.

"Everyone's waiting for you in the kitchen for your first meal ritual," she said with a fond smile.

"Ji," I replied softly, fingers brushing my dupatta as I prepared to leave.

After seeing her off, I turned to Moni and asked her to guide me to the royal kitchen.

Once reached, I began preparing the day's meal.

I decided to cook one favourite dish for each family member, as well as one sweet dish.

"Devrani-sa..." I looked at Jiji, who had also changed into fresh clothes, and smiled softly at her.

She grinned widely with excitement. "So, you are here."

I smiled, looking at her as she came to stand beside me. "I was just wondering what everyone likes to eat," I said.

She smiled gently. "Well, I think everyone will like whatever you cook. These three brothers are quite sensible. They don't throw many tantrums. But Ranvijay... he loves ***Dal-Baati-Churma*** a lot,"

"Oh, okay," I nodded.

She adjusted her dupatta more comfortably over her shoulder. "I should help you,"

I quickly shook my head and tried to say, "Jiji, it's alright. I can d—"

"It's all right, Aishwarya. We'll cook together," she cut in gently. "With talks," she added with a wink, and I smiled.

Honestly, I liked her. Her warmth and friendliness made it clear how much she was trying to break the ice and help me feel at ease in this new world.

With her, Badi-maa, Agastya, and the others, I felt warmly welcomed.

We began cooking together, and before we realised it, the sun was overhead. By the time we finished, it was noon. She let out a deep breath and stretched her arms a little.

I smiled watching her, and she said, "Aishwarya, it smells so good. Now let's see what the boys say,"

I smiled and nodded. "Ji, Jiji."

"Come on, let's get refreshed before lunch," she said.

We walked together toward our chambers. Both of ours were located close to each other.

I stepped into mine, and the moment I entered the bedroom, my eyes instinctively moved to the couch.

There he was seated, leaning over a low table, surrounded by scrolls, papers, and a heavy brass stamp, dressed in white, calm and focused. But the moment the soft chime of my anklets reached his ears, he lifted his gaze.

As soon as our eyes met, I froze.

A strong, sudden shiver ran through me, and I immediately lowered my gaze. My fingers reached to adjust my dupatta, pulling it a little more forward over my head.

I continued walking slowly, silently, hiding my face in the folds of the dupatta, feeling its gentle sway with every step.

Just as I was about to disappear into the adjoining section of the chamber, towards the bathing room, I heard his voice.

“Aishwarya,”

I shivered hard and froze in my tracks. My heart quickened violently as I turned to look at him.

With an almost inaudible voice, I somehow managed, “Ji.”

He stood up from the couch and walked toward me, and with every step he took, a part of me wanted to run, to escape this suddenly overwhelming moment.

I didn’t know what had changed since I went to freshen up, but now, something inside me was fluttering madly. I couldn’t look at him when he finally stood before me.

His nearness felt like heat slowly spreading over my skin. My cheeks flushed, and my fingers instinctively moved to trace the edges of my bangles, trying to hide my nervousness in the motion.

“Mm, Aishwarya... What happened earlier... like, I didn’t know you were there. I didn’t mean to startle or scare you.”

“It’s okay,” I said quickly, trying to shift my gaze anywhere but at him.

“I’m really sorry,” he said again in an even softer tone.

I nodded, still unable to meet his eyes. “It’s okay. I am... I mean, I wasn’t scared.”

What are you even saying, Aishwarya?

“I mean, not like that...”

He smiled a little, and I immediately dropped my gaze again, feeling the flush rise hotter on my cheeks.

“Hukum, everyone is waiting for you in the dining hall,” came an attendant’s voice, making me blink abruptly, jolting back to the present.

“Ji, we’re coming,” he answered calmly, and I lifted my gaze slightly.

I cooked for everyone. And the thought of him not liking the food tightened something in my chest.

“Shall we?” he asked gently.

I nodded faintly, feeling the anxiety flooding through me like a hurricane crashing over the shore. “Ji.” I forgot the entire purpose of returning to the chamber.

I adjusted my dupatta a little and began walking beside him. Our steps matched naturally. I noticed he slowed his pace whenever I lagged behind.

My heart was thudding in my ears as we walked through the corridors and along the royal garden. Even though my gaze was low, fixed firmly on the marbled path beneath, I could feel everyone’s eyes on us. Attendants, guards, and people passing by—I could feel the weight of their curiosity.

“This way,” he mumbled, pointing to where two corridors diverged.

I followed his lead toward the dining hall, and the moment we approached the stairs to step up, my knees trembled slightly.

My hands curled tightly into fists against my skirt as I stepped inside with him. My fingers trembled, feeling all those eyes...watching.

What must they be thinking?

I was sure they must have thought I was not worthy of him, that I didn’t belong here. That I was plain and... dull... and nothing like him.

I swallowed hard and blinked, trying to focus.

Suddenly, I felt his fingers touch my hand, making me shiver violently.

I lifted my gaze in panic, afraid someone might have noticed.

But his touch was so gentle. His fingers slid across the back of my hand and moved toward my palm, slowly undoing the fist I didn’t realise I’d made.

“Calm down,” he whispered.

Yet my heart thudded, but a little less violently than before. I swallowed and lowered my gaze again as we walked forward.

I noticed the two empty seats arranged in the centre, clearly meant for us.

As soon as our presence was known, all eyes turned in our direction. All the conversation faded. Only the soft jingle of my anklets remained, echoing in the silence.

I stood near the couch and joined my hands in a respectful gesture to greet everyone.

They smiled politely, and I lowered myself onto the couch. He also sat beside me, and soon the attendees began serving the food.

My heart was pounding furiously, and my breathing grew uneven with every passing moment. Soon, all the plates were full. Ranaji, Jiji, Agastya, Badi-maa, a few ladies I didn't know, some men, probably officials, and several attendants surrounded the table.

Nerves coiled tightly in my stomach when I saw him reach out toward the plate, taking a bite of the dal and baati. My heart stopped for a second. I squeezed my eyes shut when he brought it to his mouth.

God, please make him like it. Please... I beg you.

I gulped, struggling to stay calm, but the silence in the hall was thick. Everyone ate quietly, and not a single person said anything.

The expressionless faces made my hands go cold.

Why is nobody reacting? Why do they all look so neutral?

My appetite vanished completely, and anxiety churned in my stomach like a storm.

"Why are you not eating?" his quiet voice broke through the silence.

I lifted my gaze toward him, flustered, and quickly brought my hand to my plate, nervously picking a small bite for myself.

I brought the food to my mouth, and the moment it touched my tongue, I realised how perfect it was.

The salt, the spice, the texture—everything was just as it should be.

I glanced at him again.

Still nothing. No reaction.

Why isn't anyone smiling? Didn't they like it?

It was good.

I looked at him again. He was simply eating silently, with no expression. It made me more uneasy than anything else.

"Mmm..." Jiji's soft murmur broke the silence in the hall. "The food is so delicious, I must say, Devrani-sa," she said with a bright smile. A soft smile appeared on my face, too, as she turned to him. "Right, Devarsa?"

A trace of timidity crossed his face as he looked up slightly. "Ji, Bhabhisa, it's delicious," he said quietly.

She smiled, and suddenly Ranaji spoke in a teasing tone. "If you're liking the food, then you should appreciate the efforts of the cook. I understand you must be feeling shy in front of all of us, but don't forget to kiss your wife's hands once you're alone."

His face turned redder with embarrassment, and I lowered my gaze at the sudden rush of heat to my cheeks. "Ji, Bhai-sa," he uttered in a low voice.

"Bhai-sa," Agastya jumped in, smiling mischievously. "If you can't bring yourself to praise her for this amazing food, I'd be more than happy to cherish my Bhabhisa for it."

And everyone burst into laughter, except him.

His face twitched with a slight flicker of annoyance, and he finally responded, "Why not, Agastya?"

Everyone finished eating after a while and showered me with jewellery, clothes, artefacts, and many more gifts for the first kitchen ritual.

However, the person I truly wanted to receive something from had already left, saying he had a lot of work to do.

I returned to my chamber and placed the gifts carefully on the table. Yet despite everything, a soft smile lingered on my lips.

I didn't know why, but I felt warmly welcomed.

Still...I couldn't ignore the way he was trying to keep his distance from me. I was somehow certain that he didn't like me.

Moni followed me and began helping to place the gifts into my trunk. But I couldn't hold back my curiosity anymore.

"How long has it been since you've been here?" I asked gently.

She smiled a little and replied, "About two years."

I nodded and lowered my gaze for a moment, feeling slightly nervous to ask my next question. "Is Hukum always like this? I mean... busy with work?"

She smiled again and nodded. "Ji, Bai-sa, ever since he came to the palace, he's always been busy with work."

"Oh," I said quietly, nodding.

"And he should be, Bai-sa," she added softly. "Everything is new to him."

I furrowed my brows slightly. "Means?"

Her smile faded a little, and she abruptly moved her hand, avoiding my gaze.

"Um, Bai-sa, Rani-sa had called me. I forgot to meet her," she said quickly, then bent to wish me politely before leaving the room.

Her behaviour left me unsettled. Something about it didn't feel normal.

Again, I was left alone in my chamber, and boredom slowly crept in.

If I had been in my kingdom, I would have been decorating the dupatta or preparing something with the maids.

But here...all I could see were books, scrolls, and piles of paper.

I looked at the table in front of the couch, where two books were still lying. The same ones he had been reading in the afternoon. In the corner stood a small shelf filled with more books, glass bottles, and neatly rolled scrolls. And

then there was another trunk that likely held even more books.

I gently sucked my lower lip as I took a hesitant step forward toward the shelf.

With trembling hands, I reached out and opened its door.

Inside, the books were arranged neatly, covered in faded reds, pale yellows, and greens. I hesitated before pulling out a fragile-looking book with pale yellow pages.

I held it carefully in my hands and scanned through its worn edges. It looked decades old.

Even though I couldn't read, I couldn't resist opening it.

My eyes caught the elegant strokes of ink on the pages, and something about them felt... so beautiful. The old wood-and-rain scent clung to its pages. I brought it closer to my nose and closed my eyes, inhaling it deeply.

It smelled like... him.

Faintly smoky, earthy, and calming. A slight smile curved on my lips.

"Aishwarya," I jolted at the deep voice, startled by it like thunder.

The book slipped from my hands and fell to the floor.

I spun to see him standing at a distance, watching me.

Panicked, I turned breathless. "I was just... I'm sorry," I tried to speak, but my voice faltered as he stepped closer. My heartbeat raced, thundering inside my chest. Fear churned inside me. "I... I'm sorry," I whispered, tears brimming in my eyes.

He stopped right before me. "Are you looking for something?" he asked in a calm voice. Slowly, I gathered myself and looked up to find his face expressionless.

I shook my head and lowered my gaze.

Silence stretched between us before he finally spoke again, this time more softly.

"I mean... You must be getting bored. Do you want something to read?"

I swallowed hard, feeling my voice stuck in my throat. After a few moments, I whispered, **“Ji, Hukum, wo...”** (Ji, Hukum, I....) I struggled to form the words, blinking nervously, still not daring to look into his eyes.

“Wo, Hukum, hum padh...humaara arth hai, humein padhna nahi aata,” (I, Hukum... I cannot... I mean, I do not know how to read.) I said it with my head bowed, feeling ashamed.

Being the youngest daughter after seven elder sisters had already made me a disappointment in my father's eyes. My mother died after giving birth to me, and for as long as I could remember, I had been called names. People cursed me for my dark complexion and blamed me for misfortune. They said my fate was as dark as my skin.

“Oh,” he breathed.

Another stretch of uncomfortable and heavy silence fell between us.

Then, unexpectedly, he said, **“Seekhne ki koi aayu nahi hoti. Aap jab bhi kahengi hum aapko sikha denge,”** (There is no age to learn. I will teach you whenever you ask me to.)

I lifted my lashes to look at him, surprised, and found him looking straight at me.

A strange tickle of fear of the misfortune I could bring into his life stirred inside me. Still, I blinked and whispered, “Ji... I would love to learn. Whenever you get free, I will be available.”

No one would have believed me if I had told them this, because I had never shown the slightest interest in reading or learning anything academic. But when he asked... I couldn't say no.

Something had shifted in me.

Maybe it was the way he had touched my feet and kissed them on our wedding night.

That single moment had kindled a new kind of respect in me for him.

“Alright,” he said gently. “In the evening after dinner.”

I nodded. “Ji.”

He smiled slightly and placed the book back on the shelf.

My eyes couldn't stop staring at him. His hair, his sharp nose, the softness of his lips, every inch of him had suddenly become magnetic. I was shamelessly memorising his face.

Then he turned and caught me looking.

A strong shiver ran down my spine, and I immediately lowered my gaze, blinking hard. **“Bhojan bahut swadisht bana tha. Kayi varshoan pashchaat aise bhojan ka anand mila humein.”** (The food was very delicious. It's been years since I tasted something like that.)

I looked up at him again. Even though I felt nervous and was trembling inside, my lips didn't hesitate to respond. “Thank you,” I said quietly.

He turned to look at me, and in that moment, when our eyes met, the world just... disappeared.

His deep black eyes held me completely. When my eyes fell on the subtle movement of his Adam's apple as he gulped, it made something flutter violently in my chest.

I didn't understand what was happening to me.

Then he spoke again, bringing me back to the present. “Badi-maa said I should give you something...as a gift for your first kitchen ritual.”

My heart pounded heavily again. “What?” I managed to ask, blinking nervously.

He looked into my eyes for a moment before stepping closer. My breath hitched, and my eyes widened as he stopped just a foot away from me. Leaning into the almirah, he took out a red cloth bundle.

“Actually,” he began softly, “the last time I ever tasted food this good... was when my mother was alive.”

He unfolded the cloth slowly as he spoke, “I was very young, and it's hard for children to remember things clearly. But for some reason, I still remember the taste of the food

my mother used to cook. There's this faded image in my mind of her calling me, pulling me into her lap, and feeding me with her hands. Her laughing..."

He paused for a moment as though he were reliving the memory. "That image of her never left me. Unfortunately, it's the only memory I have of her. I remember she used to wear these on her hands...I saw them while she fed me. They aren't very expensive or exquisite, but they mean so much to me."

He looked down at the cloth in his hands.

"She's no more... and I haven't heard the sound of these bangles in years. I could never bring myself to give them to anyone else. But if you'd like... they're yours."

Then, almost uncertainly, he added, "I know you might expect something prettier, something new, not old ornaments that belonged to my mother and—"

"I want them," I interrupted gently.

His eyes flicked up to mine, and a look of surprise crossed his face. He searched my face for a moment before asking softly, "Are you sure? I mean, if you'd prefer new ones, I can get them for you. It's completely all right if you don't want to wear these."

I shook my head lightly, holding his gaze. "I want these, Hukum."

He swallowed hard and carefully untied the last knot of the red cloth. My cheeks were already warming just from the fact that we were talking to this extent. I was getting flushed from how close we were standing.

As the cloth unfolded, my eyes landed on the thick, old gold bangles resting inside. They were beautiful. A kind of beauty that belonged to memories.

"They're beautiful," I murmured, looking at them.

He extended them toward me, and with trembling fingers, I took the four heavy bangles into my hands. Their weight surprised me.

As I tried slipping one on, I found myself struggling to put it on. They were thick and heavy, and I couldn't hold them steady in one hand while slipping them onto the other.

"May I help?" he asked softly.

A soft shiver ran down my spine, and I lifted my fluttering gaze to meet his. He blinked as our eyes met, and I felt my cheeks flame with heat. My stomach twisted in nervous knots as I nodded. "Ji."

He stepped closer, and my body instinctively retreated a small step, pressing me back against the almirah. The chamber suddenly felt much smaller, as if his presence filled every inch of the space between us.

I bit the inside of my lip as he reached out and took one bangle from my palm. His eyes moved between mine and my hands, and every moment felt like it stretched into eternity.

His large palm closed gently around my smaller, henna-stained hand, and feeling the warmth of his touch, butterflies erupted in my stomach.

My gaze fell instantly, and a rush of heat spread through my cheeks.

His hands, too, bore the faint orange of mehendi. And even though I could feel the rough texture of his fingers, his grip wasn't too tight.

My head tilted slightly up as I lifted my gaze to see his eyes watching my hands. We were so close that I could smell him. And because of my shorter height, I only reached the base of his shoulder.

He was cautious and gentle. And I...I was losing control of my heart.

His touch was a strange contradiction of rough yet soft, firm yet careful. He slowly pushed the first bangle onto my wrist, and while he focused on my hand, I couldn't stop my eyes from shamelessly observing his face. His lips... they were beautiful.

Suddenly, he looked up, meeting my gaze and smiling.

I immediately dropped my eyes to my wrist, blushing profusely.

Ohhh my God! What the hell is happening to me?

He didn't say a word. I felt his hand move again, taking the second bangle from my palm and sliding it up my other wrist. I didn't dare look at him again. My skin was tingling with goosebumps rising along my neck.

My eyes remained fixed on his hands as he gently released one wrist and took the other, picking up the remaining two bangles. His fingers wrapped around me, making a space between the bangles to push them in.

His grip was still gentle, but firmer than before.

My lips parted to inhale deeply, and suddenly, without warning, I felt goosebumps prickling over my chest. My nipples tightened, and I sucked in a shaky breath.

I looked up into his eyes, unsure of what was happening to me.

How could just a touch... do this?

Why was his nearness making me feel things I'd never felt before?

Was it wrong to feel this way? Or was I...abnormal?

Even after he slipped the last bangle into place, I couldn't look away. I was feeling hot and confused, and turned breathless just by staring at his face a little longer. It was as if the air in the room had changed.

He smiled again softly and met my eyes. This time, I didn't look away. I couldn't look away.

His gaze had me nailed in place, pulling me in like a current I didn't know how to resist.

"It's beautiful," he said in a low, quiet voice.

My gaze dropped to my wrists filled with bangles, with no room left for even a single extra bangle, as if they had always waited only for these four.

I gulped and nodded slowly. "Yes," I whispered, blinking nervously.

He was still holding my hand.

I tried to calm my racing heart as he brought my hand closer to his face. My brows furrowed slightly, and my lips parted, unsure of what he was doing. My chest rose and fell rapidly as his lips gently touched the back of my fingers.

A strong, unbearable shiver surged through me. I snatched my hand back instinctively, as though his touch had struck some hidden chord inside me.

I gasped slightly, trying to understand the sensations flooding through me. My stomach twisted with a strange flutter deep within.

"What happened?" he asked in a soft voice, his brows knitting with concern.

"I... I don't know. I'm feeling... sick, suddenly," I murmured, placing my hand over my stomach, trying to name the feeling but failing.

He smiled a little, and I frowned in confusion. "Oh," he breathed, and asked, "What exactly is happening?"

I blinked through my breathlessness and dropped my eyes back to the floor. Because...because I could barely find the words.

"I don't know, but I think something... twisted. In my... my belly."

He took a small step back, and the moment he did, I felt a little more grounded. The rush of air on my flushed skin helped cool my burning cheeks. My breathing slowly returned to normal.

"I think you need water," he said, walking over to the table. He poured water from the jug into a glass and brought it to me, offering it gently. I took it with trembling hands.

A slight smile lingered on his face that he was perhaps trying to hide all along, but couldn't.

What's wrong with me?

"You should take some rest," he said softly. "You're probably tired of all the cooking, and everything is still new here."

I nodded lightly, and he stepped back, walking over to the couch and quietly getting back to his work.

He had told me to rest, and perhaps he was right. I needed it.

I turned toward the bed, doing my best not to let the soft jingling of my anklets and bangles echo too loudly in the quiet chamber. But they betrayed me. The soft chime of every step filled the space between us.

I sat down carefully, trying not to mess the dupatta on my head. My eyes, however, remained fixed on him.

The twisting in my stomach had eased. The goosebumps had faded. But I still felt...different. My insides were still pulsing, affected by his very presence.

I was confused as to why this was happening to me. Why only when he came close?

Maybe it was because he was a man. But...my father was a man too. The soldiers were men as well. And I had never felt anything like that around them.

Maybe that was because I'd grown up around them, and this man, my husband, I had only just begun to know.

Perhaps things will improve over time. Perhaps I'll start feeling normal again. Maybe I'll feel good around him.

My lips faintly stretched at the thought. But even then, his presence still felt overwhelming. I didn't know exactly what it was doing to me, but it undoubtedly was doing something.

"Bai-sa," came Moni's voice, breaking the silence as she entered the room.

I immediately stood up from the bed. "Ji?"

"Bai-sa, the dinner will be served here, in the chambers. Let me help you change," she said. I glanced toward the window and noticed the sun dipping.

"Okay," I said. We walked toward the dressing room and closed the door behind us, leaving him alone in the bedroom with his books and duty.

The moment the door shut, I inhaled deeply. And just like that, I felt a little better.

“What happened? Are you okay?” Moni asked, her brows creased together.

I gave her a slight nod, but her gaze lingered on me. I hesitated, but then thought maybe she could help. She knew him better than I did.

“There’s something I need to tell,” I said softly.

She smiled warmly. “Yes, of course.”

I took another breath as she came closer. “I don’t think everything is... good between us,” I drawled.

She just smiled again.

“It’s alright. Arranged marriages don’t start with love. It happens gradually. Things will get easier and more beautiful... when you bear his child in this belly of yours,” she said, touching my stomach with affection.

I gulped. “Oh.” That was all I could manage.

So that is it. The child would make things better. I thought, and she smiled as if she had heard it too.

Maybe she was right. Usually, women get pregnant after their weddings. All my sisters did, and they had grown happy with their babies, too.

But... for that, I would have to ask him for his seeds.

Hesitantly, I looked at her, then asked, “But... do you think he’ll be happy to give me his seeds?”

Moni blinked for a moment, but then gave a warm smile. “Oh... seeds! Of course. Why wouldn’t he? Maybe you’ll have the chance soon.”

A slight smile tugged at the corners of my lips. “But... what if he won’t?” I asked softly.

She pulled my dupatta slightly lower over my head. “Then you should ask him directly. You’re his wife. It’s your right.”

I nodded, swallowing. “Okay.”

She helped me out of the weighty bridal outfit. It was so heavy, it almost felt like armour. In its place, she dressed me in a simple cotton outfit.

“Here you go,” she said after tying the blouse and draping the dupatta over my head.

I instantly felt lighter and a lot freer. Walking a few steps, I was marvelling at how peaceful it felt not to be drowning in heavy lehengas.

"Can I take off all these heavy pieces of jewellery too?" I asked.

She smiled. "Yes, you can. Since you don't have to meet anyone now, you can take off the jewellery."

"Okay. I don't want anything on my neck, ears, or these heavy armlets and this waist chain. They are very noisy. I feel like I'm disturbing him with all this sound."

She nodded, still smiling. "Let me help you out of it."

She unclasped the jewellery one by one, baring my neck, my ears, my arms, my waist. Only the bangles, toe rings, anklets, rings, and the small head ornament remained in place, since they were essentials.

"Feeling good?" she asked.

"Yes," I nodded. "Thank you so much, Moni."

She smiled. "Now rest a bit until your dinner arrives," she said and left the dressing chamber quietly.

I inhaled deeply and looked at myself in the mirror.

And then, instinctively, I pulled the dupatta a little lower to cover my hairline. I brought it forward, settling it over my chest and waist to make sure nothing was revealed.

Freshly changed, I stepped out into the room again and found him still seated on the couch, immersed in papers.

I stood there for a moment.

Should I talk to him? Or should I just sit silently?

I inhaled deeply and walked toward the bed. The soft chime of my anklets resonated in the chamber, and as I felt his gaze lift toward me, I immediately lowered my eyes.

Focus, Aishwarya. Focus. You'll feel normal after the baby. Don't worry.

I reached the bed and sat down in silence, unsure of what to do next.

His attention had returned to the papers before him. I watched quietly as his hand dipped the feather quill into the

inkpot, then wrote something, paused, read from a large book, and dipped again. There was a rhythm to it.

He was beautiful... handsome in a coarse, composed way. His jaw was sharp, his arms were veiny. And I just kept watching him like that... quietly.

As evening fell, darkness slowly enveloped the chamber. A few attendants entered, holding lamps in their hands, and began to light the room, placing clay lamps in stands, igniting torches by the walls.

Soon, the entire chamber was bathed in a golden, flickering glow. It felt so serene, softening the chill of nightfall through its warmth.

The attendants left, and he finally seemed to finish his work. He began rolling up the papers, capped the inkpot, and tied the scrolls with a piece of cloth. His fingers, slightly stained with ink, moved deftly as he secured the knot.

I rose from the bed and glanced toward the jug and glass on the table. I walked over, poured some water, and handed him the glass.

As I held it out, he looked up at me.

"You don't have to do this, Aishwarya," he said.

I instantly pulled the glass back. Had I done something wrong?

Was he angry... because I had pulled my hand away earlier when he touched me with his lips?

"I'm sorry," I said softly.

He stood up from the couch. "I mean, I can take the water myself," he said with a gentle smile.

And I... I just stared at the way his lips moved so gracefully when he spoke. It was... distracting.

He smiled again, slightly, and my cheeks flushed with warmth. "Though, since you've already filled the glass," he said, extending his hand, "I should probably take it."

Why was he so beautiful... so kind... so...

"Aishwarya," he said again, a bit more softly.

I quickly lowered my gaze to his hand and handed him the glass.

He took it with the same smile, then brought it to his lips. I watched as he drank. The water glistened on his mouth, and suddenly, my throat felt dry.

Those were the same lips that had touched my hand.

Oh, my God!

"Shall we start?" he asked.

"Hm?" I blinked, raising my brows, confused.

He smiled wider and took a step toward me. Gently, he took hold of my hand in his. "Come here," he said, guiding me closer to the couch. As he led me, butterflies swirled wildly in my stomach.

"Sit down," he said softly.

I stared blankly at him, slowly lowering myself onto the couch.

He sat beside me, and my eyes widened. He was close. Just next to me. I could smell him, and our arms were only inches apart.

I blinked nervously and lowered my gaze, feeling suddenly timid.

"Shall we start your first lesson?" he asked.

I swallowed, glancing at the papers and ink, and nodded hesitantly. "Ji," I managed to say.

He looked at me thoughtfully. "Do you know how to hold a quill?"

I shook my head gently, feeling embarrassed.

He gave a faint smile. "It's okay."

I followed his gaze as it moved from my face to the table. On it were sheets of paper, ink pots, feathers, and a small lamp that softly lit the area.

He reached forward and picked up two feather quills.

"Here, take it," he said, offering one to me.

I took the quill nervously, holding it awkwardly, as if it were a knitting needle.

“Not like this,” he said kindly, demonstrating with his own hand. His index finger and thumb held the quill near the nib, while the rest of his fingers curled into a loose fist.

I looked down at my hand, then tried to mimic his grip, but the quill kept slipping out of my grasp. I looked at him helplessly.

He drew in his lower lip slightly as he watched me, and just that slight movement sent warmth flooding to my cheeks.

My brow furrowed in concentration.

“Like this,” he repeated gently.

I looked down again, observing his fingers. But mine wouldn’t cooperate.

Suddenly, he shifted closer, making my breath hitch. My heartbeat kicked up wildly.

He reached out and cupped my hand, adjusting my fingers with his own. His touch was firm and reassuring in a warm, gentle way.

Calm down. Calm down. Calm down, I told myself.

I tried to focus on what he was teaching, but all I could feel were the butterflies flapping their wings violently inside me.

“Just like this,” he said and slowly withdrew his hand.

I looked down, and for the first time in my life, I was properly holding a quill...though my fingers were still trembling from his touch.

I blinked, trying to calm the storm inside me.

“Now what?” I asked softly.

He pulled the table a little closer until its edge brushed against my knees.

“Now, I’ll teach you to make basic strokes.”

As he looked down at the paper, I found myself watching him. I looked at his lips as they moved, the curve of his jaw, the small mole on his earlobe. His skin was sun-warmed yet fair. His lashes framed his eyes just right. I didn’t know how or why... but just looking at him made me feel a little dizzy.

He lifted his face suddenly and met my eyes.

"I promise," he said, a smile playing on his lips, "if you can learn to make these strokes, I'll let you stare at me as long as you like."

My eyes widened, and I instantly dropped my gaze.

My heart thundered wildly in my chest. I was confused, and I could feel the heat rushing to my cheeks.

"No... no, I mean... yes. Yes, basic strokes?" I asked in a slow voice, trying to pretend I was paying attention and not just staring at him. But inside my heart beat in a furious rhythm.

Suddenly, I heard him mutter in a low voice, "It's okay to feel it."

Startled, I lifted my gaze and looked at his face.

He met my eyes and asked gently, "Shall we start, Aishwarya?"

I immediately lowered my eyes and looked down at the paper he had just slid toward me. He pushed the inkpot a little closer, and I gave a slight nod. "Ji."

"Good," he murmured.

I gulped in an attempt to steady my heartbeat as he leaned forward toward the table and drew a clean, straight line across the page.

"You should learn how to make a straight line first," he said softly. I nodded, trying to focus. "Dip the quill into the ink first," he instructed, looking at me again before drifting toward the inkpot.

I blinked nervously and dipped the pen, but my fingers slipped, and instead of neatly inking the nib, I smeared ink over my fingers.

Embarrassment flooded me.

"It's alright," he whispered.

I watched as he reached for the cloth he had been using to wipe his own fingers earlier. Without hesitation, he took my hand and began to wipe the ink from my skin.

A strong shiver ran down my spine, and he lifted his eyes to meet mine. We were close. Too close. I gulped and blinked, barely able to breathe.

“Jaise aapka gehna aapki laaj hai, humaari gehna ye syaahi hai, kintu prateet hota hai ki hum dono bina kisi prayaas ke ek doosre ko hi rang rahein hain.” (Like the way you wear timidness as your jewel, I wear this ink as mine... and yet, it seems we are painting each other effortlessly.) he said in a low voice, almost a whisper.

My brows pinched slightly. I didn't understand what he had just said. “Huh?” I asked softly, dazed.

My lips parted slightly, and my cheeks flushed hot. Anyone could have told just by looking at me that I was in a state of flustered confusion.

He glanced at my mouth and said slowly, “Your lips...”

I instinctively touched them with my fingers. “My lips?”

He smirked lightly, and his eyes darkened as he held my gaze. “...Got my ink.”

My eyes widened in panic. I had touched my lips with the same stained finger. I quickly lowered my gaze in shame, feeling the heat burning through my skin.

I didn't understand why I was so easily flustered around him. Why couldn't I breathe normally or think straight?

He looked back down at the table and muttered in a voice so quiet it felt like it was only meant for me, “Some marks are permanent, Aishwarya.”

What???



2. Ranvijay

I noticed her growing tense almost immediately upon my statement. Every slight movement of hers, the tinkling of her bangles ringing through the chamber, kept stealing my attention.

She looked down, blinking nervously, and asked in a hesitant voice, ***“Hukum... hum ye dhokar aayein?”*** (Hukum... can I go clean this?)

I bit the inside of my lower lip to hide the smile threatening to spread across my face and gave a small nod. She was clearly shivering; I could see her hands trembling. “Of course,” I said, keeping my tone neutral.

No sooner had I spoken than she was on her feet, scurrying into the bathing room and disappearing behind the door. The moment she was gone, a wide grin broke out on my face, and a chuckle escaped my lips.

“Oh my God,” I breathed, smiling to myself. She was cute.

No, not just cute. She was deeply, genuinely adorable. The way she looked at me made me want to keep watching her forever. There was something about her, something that separated her from every other girl I'd known. The way she spoke, the way she respected others, the way she watched everything—it was like she was observing things so closely. And above all, she was extremely sensitive.

I noticed it when I touched her hand. Her fingers were cold, and they were trembling so much that I had to grip them a little more firmly, just to keep her steady.

She felt young, not just in terms of years but in spirit. Or maybe the strangeness of the palace and the circumstances simply overwhelmed her. I would've felt the same in her place. Being married off to someone you didn't know, in a palace full of strangers, expected to adjust to a whole new world... I could understand why she was so withdrawn.

But again, she was sweet. And innocent.

And she was shy, very, very shy. I wondered if she had started liking me. I could see it in her eyes. The way she looked at me when she thought I wasn't watching, the way her expressions shifted when I came near... It was subtle, but it was there.

Maybe it was because our relationship was still new, and also because it was an arranged marriage. We didn't know each other. What could she possibly expect from me, after all?

Still, something felt off.

There were moments when she seemed... lost. Like her thoughts were in a place far from here. Perhaps it was just the transition. Or maybe it was something deeper.

That was why I wanted to take it slow. To be patient. To give her time to settle. She was young, and this marriage wasn't of her choosing. She deserved gentleness and comfort, and above all, my support.

Suddenly, I realised it's been quite a time since she'd been in the bathing chamber. Concerned, I stood and crossed the room, heading toward the dressing room.

Finding the door ajar, I cleared my throat, and she turned to face me at once.

"Hukum," she murmured, quickly adjusting her dupatta, and I stepped further inside.

She blinked, visibly nervous, especially when I stood barely a foot away from her. Her lips were swollen, dark red, and slightly wobbling.

"It is not coming out," she whispered, clearly distressed.

I offered a small smile, keeping my voice soft. "It's okay if it's not coming out."

She blinked again, and her gaze dropped to the ground.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. "I'm so stupid. What will people think of me now? They'll think I'm even uglier than before." Her voice broke, and a single tear rolled down her cheek.

I suddenly felt a heaviness in my chest. Maybe I shouldn't have teased her like that.

I took a step forward. "Aishwarya, it's alright. It's just the ink," I tried to say, and she lifted her gaze slightly, shaking her head.

A few more tears rolled down her cheeks as she whispered through trembling lips, "I'm a very bad daughter... and now, a very bad wife." Her words weighed heavily on me.

"Just because you got ink on your lips?" I asked, but she didn't respond.

I held her hand gently. "Come with me," I said and led her out of the dressing room to the couch.

I picked up the inkpot, dipped my finger in it, and applied a little to my own lips. And she stared at me blankly.

"See? Nothing happened. The ink will fade with time," I said.

Her eyes widened, and she walked toward me. "Hukum," she said in her usual soft voice, lifting her dupatta as she moved closer. "Your lips..." she breathed.

I smiled, stopping her midway. My hand gently grasped her bangle-covered wrist, and I looked at her with a slight smile.

"It's alright, Aishwarya. Just as we sometimes get stains on our clothes while cooking or eating, it's normal to get ink while studying. It's nothing," I assured in a hushed voice.

She stared silently into my eyes, and I couldn't help but look back. Her dark, magnificent eyes, framed by thick lashes and dark brows, made her look like a goddess.

I smiled softly. "It's okay," I repeated, and she immediately lowered her gaze. I could see her breathing turn shaky as she took a few steps back.

I gently bit my lower lip, and suddenly,

"Devar-sa," came Bhabhi-sa's voice, drawing both our attention as she entered the chamber.

She was smiling at first, but when her eyes shifted between us, her smile faltered slightly, and her brows

creased together.

Damn it.

"Jiji," Aishwarya said quickly.

Bhabhi-sa laughed a little. "Seems like I picked the wrong time," she teased with a chuckle.

"No, Jiji," Aishwarya said and walked to her.

"It's alright. I was just leaving," Bhabhi-sa replied. "I came to hand over the dinner to the attendants and check on you. Eat well and rest. Tomorrow, you both have to visit the Devi Temple."

"Devi Temple?" Aishwarya asked.

She nodded. "Yes. Actually, Ranaji and I are going as well. After our wedding, we never got the chance to visit the temple together, so we decided the four of us should go now together, as couples."

I looked at the attendants setting the dinner plates on the table. "Okay, Jiji," Aishwarya said.

Bhabhi-sa leaned in to kiss her forehead lovingly and said, "You're glowing in maroon. Looking so beautiful. Good night."

A slight warmth stirred in my heart, seeing how Bhabhi-sa didn't make her feel awkward or even mention the ink.

Aishwarya nodded and walked with her out of the room to bid goodbye.

I let out a deep sigh. I should have thought before staining my lips. Now she might've misunderstood everything. And worse, I knew she'd tell Bhai-sa, and he would tease me to death. *God!*

I heard the soft jingle of her anklets as she walked back in, adjusting her dupatta gracefully.

She was smiling... and blushing.

I frowned slightly. *A few moments ago, she was crying. And now she's blushing?*

She advanced to the table with timid grace, and I shamelessly let my eyes linger on her ink-stained lips.

She had naturally enchanting lips. Plush... like berries. A deep, lush brown-red. So pristine, they felt utterly divine.

I saw her gulp nervously before speaking in a slow voice. ***“Jiji keh rahin thi ki bhojan thanda hone se poorv grahan kar lein aur aapko kahun ki bacha kaarya bhojan ke pashchaat hi karein,”*** (Jiji said that we should have dinner before it gets cold. Also, she asked me to tell you to do the remaining work only after dinner.)

A slight smile touched my lips. “Of course,” I said, looking down at the dinner plate.

But then I lifted my gaze again and saw her still standing there. “Come, sit here,” I said, patting the spot beside me.

She blinked nervously. “With you?” she asked, raising her brows.

I blinked, too, but a soft smile curved my lips. She looked at me as if, in that moment, I was the only thing in her world.

“Yes, Aishwarya. Come, sit with me,” I said gently.

She inhaled and walked toward me slowly. Meanwhile, I cleared the papers and other things from the table and pulled the food plate in front of us.

She sat with such care, making sure not to touch me, and that alone made me shift slightly closer to her on purpose.

She inhaled sharply, and I turned to look at her face. I could tell by the way her chest rose and her lashes fluttered that her heart was racing again.

Her arms remained stiff, taking great care not to brush against mine. I tilted my head and asked, “Shall we start?”

She blinked and gave a tiny nod. Finally, her gaze left my face and landed on the plate.

“It’s only one plate,” she said, her voice faltering at the end.

I heard the hesitation and asked in a calm voice, “Will you mind if I eat from your plate?”

She immediately shook her head. “No... I mean, it’s your plate,” she said quickly.

I moved my hand forward, made a bite, and brought it toward her.

She stared at me wide-eyed, blinking fast.

"Let's say our plate," I said in a low voice. She remained frozen, staring at me. "Open your mouth, Aishwarya," I said gently.

Her lips parted slightly. "Open my mouth?" she asked in a whisper.

I nodded. "Yes. Open your mouth. You didn't eat well in the afternoon either."

Without further question, she opened her mouth abruptly and took the bite, being careful not to let her lips touch my fingers.

"Good girl," I murmured, licking the remaining curry from my fingertip. "Do you like the taste?" I asked, watching her.

She nodded slightly. "Ji."

Again, her face flushed. And her cheeks bloomed with a familiar blush. Her eyebrows had thinned in the middle. I could tell she was feeling 'sick' all over again.

"Remember what Bhabhisa said? Eat well," I reminded, looking back at the food. "So now help me finish it, and in return, I'll tell you something interesting about me," I said.

She blinked, and at last, her eyes dropped to the plate. Slowly, nervously, she reached forward with her hand and began eating.

I helped her taste everything on the plate, and though she was clearly shy, she tried her best to keep up. She was still nervous about sharing, but she was doing it.

When only the last **roti** was left, I leaned back slightly on the couch and said, "I'm done. You'll have to finish it."

She immediately looked at me with wide eyes. "What???" I smiled. "No, I cannot," she cried in protest.

"You can. I know," I said calmly.

She shook her head at once. "No, I'm full."

I leaned forward again, picked up the last roti, tore a bite, dipped it into the curry, and held it out toward her.

“Open your mouth,” I said in a low but firm voice.

She gulped nervously and shook her head lightly, but she opened her mouth and began chewing.

One after the other, I fed her every bite until the plate was empty.

She looked at me with the same soft, timid gaze.

She swallowed the last bite, then glanced at me again, uncertain.

“Good, Aishwarya,” I murmured.



3. Aishwarya

It felt like I was melting into the floor.

My heart raced in a frantic rhythm, my cheeks turned unbearably warm, and my stomach fluttered with strange sensations at his appreciation. Above all, he was still looking at me.

My stomach felt stuffed more than I had ever experienced in my entire life. I didn't know what was happening, but something was, and I couldn't make sense of it.

Gulping nervously, my eyes locked onto his without meaning to, as if I was losing control of myself. I wanted to get up and walk a little, to escape his gaze. But I felt weak, feeling utterly incapable of forming a single word. My eyes occasionally dropped to his lips, still stained with ink, and I didn't know why, but they looked... attractive.

"Do you want to walk a little?" he asked in a low voice. I just blinked, watching how his lips moved when he spoke, and gave a light nod. "Ji," It slipped out like a breath, and he smiled faintly.

He stood up from the couch and said, "Come, let me show you the chamber."

I stood too, quickly fixing my dupatta as I followed him.

My gaze fell on the thick gold bangles he had gifted me. A smile crept onto my face as I remembered what Jiji had said about them. She had noticed them and asked if he had given them to me. I said yes, and she seemed genuinely happy for me.

But I was still confused. Did he truly like me? I had asked her. And she had said yes, because he kissed me. Just remembering that made me blush all over again.

I couldn't hold my smile. Maybe he did like me. Perhaps we could have a happy, loving life.

"Come, Aishwarya," His voice broke into my thoughts.

“Ji,” I replied quickly, following behind him. My anklets jingled softly with each step. My eyes couldn’t help but trail up and watch him as he walked ahead. He had his hands folded behind him like a gentleman. He was tall, with broad shoulders, and his torso was lean and well-proportioned. His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, revealing his veins along his muscular forearms, and I noticed his fingers were adorned with rings.

Suddenly, he turned around and extended his hand. “Walk with me.”

Blinking anxiously, I quickened my steps to stand beside him. His hand was still out, waiting patiently.

Nervousness left my palms slick with cold sweat, yet I hesitantly placed my palm into his. My hand felt so small, so delicate in his large, rough one.

He gently closed his fingers around mine, and my breath caught in my throat. Blood rushed to my cheeks as I felt a strange sense of possession, like I belonged to him. Not just as his wife... but as something more.

He gave my hand a light squeeze, and my eyes travelled quickly from our joined hands up to his face.

“Come,” he said softly, and I followed him without thinking. My mind was consumed by the simple yet powerful fact that he was holding my hand.

I couldn’t take my eyes off him. His face was calm, yet impossibly captivating.

We walked out of the chamber into the adjoining part, connected through the hallways. It was a courtyard that opened onto the garden.

The night had fallen, and the moonlight lay scattered across the place like a silken carpet. Chilly breezes kissed my skin more and more as we walked toward the carpet laid over the marble floor in front of the garden.

As soon as we stepped into the moonlight, my heart fluttered again. The glow on his face was almost ethereal.

He was the most beautiful man I had ever seen, or maybe the only man I had ever looked at in this way.

He turned his gaze from the garden to me, and the moment our eyes met, something shifted in my stomach. My brows drew together, feeling warmer, despite the cool breeze. A soft smile appeared on his face.

“Do you like it here?” I nodded before I even registered what he’d said. His eyes held something magnetic, irresistibly pulling me toward him. “Let’s sit, then,” he said, lowering himself onto the carpet and leaning back against a pile of pillows. My eyes followed his every move. “Sit down, Aishwarya,” he said again, looking at me, and I finally moved, sitting down cautiously, careful not to touch him.

He inhaled deeply and turned his gaze to the garden. Meanwhile, mine stayed fixed on him. His feet rested only inches away from where I sat.

He had long and clean feet, with trimmed nails and faint veins visible beneath the skin. His skin was fair, and finally, his ankles disappeared into the hem of his lower garment.

“What do you like to do, Aishwarya?”

His voice broke my gaze, and I snapped my eyes up from his feet to meet his.

“Ji?” I asked, startled.

He smiled gently and repeated, “What do you like to do?”

I immediately shook my head and said, “Nothing.”

I didn’t want him to think I was looking at his feet with that kind of intention.

He raised his brows slightly and smiled. “I mean... just like I enjoy reading, writing, and economics, you must like something,” he said.

I messed up again, didn’t I?

I nodded, feeling an ocean of embarrassment crash over me. “Ji, I like to knit and sew.”

His eyes glimmered with amusement as he smiled. “Amazing. You are so talented.”

A faint smile appeared on my lips. "Thank you," I murmured.

Silence followed, and I dropped my gaze to the bangles on my wrist.

There was something I needed to ask him as well. I didn't know if he would give it to me, but it was the only thing that could help me feel normal around him.

I didn't understand why I felt so drawn to him. I had never felt that way with anyone before. It made my stomach churn, my knees weak, my cheeks burn with fever. If things continued like this, I knew I wouldn't be able to focus on my household duties at all.

"What are you thinking?" he asked suddenly, and I looked up, startled. My cheeks flushed again.

"Nothing," I managed to say, and he smiled.

"Come here," he said, patting the space beside his chest on the carpet.

My eyes widened, yet I couldn't help but nod. Every part of me tingled with sensation as I shifted closer.

My heart was pounding wildly; nevertheless, I lay down beside him. My head rested on a pillow as I blinked nervously, trying hard not to touch him. He moved slightly closer, propping his head on his elbow, and his gaze fixed on mine.

"Hukum..." I breathed, watching his eyes. My fingers fidgeted with each other over my stomach, and one of my knees bent awkwardly in the air. I felt so timid, so overwhelmingly flushed, lying beside him like this.

"Do you like me?" he asked in a low voice.

I couldn't help but nod. "Ji," The word came out in almost a whisper, and he smiled.

My eyes blinked anxiously, tracking his every movement. And as his gaze dipped from my eyes to my lips, he took a slow, deeper breath before looking back into my eyes.

"Who do you love the most?"

I gulped as his gaze danced across my face, inspecting every little detail. I observed the way his pupils dilated as he stared again at my lips. His breathing remained calm, but I could feel its weight.

"My father," I answered quietly.

He swallowed, and I watched his Adam's apple rise and fall.

"Do you miss your mother?" he asked softly, leaning in a little more. At that moment, there was nothing else in the world except him.

"I don't know anything about her," I replied just as softly.

He moved his free hand from the carpet to mine. And I shivered at the sudden contact.

My eyes widened. My lips parted as a fresh wave of sensation shot through my spine.

His hand lay over mine, right on my stomach, and I could feel his skin through the thin layer of my dupatta.

"Do you think I like you?" he asked, and I swallowed hard. My pulse raced again, and something twisted in my stomach.

I shouldn't have eaten so much earlier. I thought, feeling my insides churn.

His gaze remained pinned on mine, making me breathless.

Dazed, I slowly shook my head at his question.

"Why?" he asked, inching closer.

I inhaled deeply. "We are no match," I whispered, staring at his lips, which were just a few glances away.

Though my heart was racing, and my fingers were trembling, I felt frozen in place. My lips quivered as his breath brushed my skin. His closeness was dizzying.

Why is he doing this?

My stomach fluttered uncontrollably, and my lashes fluttered again, rapidly, as I took in the scent of his cologne. He was close. So close.

"You are beautiful..." he breathed against my skin.

It felt like my world had flipped upside down. My chest rose and fell with unsteady breaths. I shut my eyes tightly as I felt his lips nearly touch mine. My lip trembled, and I bit it, pulling slightly back, trying to maintain the distance.

As his hand left mine and crept to my chin, my breath turned shaky. Gently, he tilted my face back toward him.

I felt something tighten in my stomach, and the very moment I felt his lips feather softly against the skin of my cheek, a strange wetness stirred deep within my core.

My lips parted as I inhaled sharply. A sudden wave of breathlessness washed over me. My fingers clenched into the fabric of my lehenga, and my heart pounded wildly in my chest. Suddenly, it hit me all at once.

Menstruation.

“Aishwarya,” he whispered.

But I had already slipped from his hold, sitting up abruptly. My entire body trembled uncontrollably as I tried to catch my breath.

“I need to go,” I whispered. My voice shook just as much as my hands.

As I attempted to rise, my dupatta slipped from my head, and my braid caught on something behind me. It hurt a moment.

Slowly, I turned, and my heart pounded violently at the sight of him holding me back with a gentle yet intentional tug at the end of my braid.

A sharp shiver coursed down my spine as his piercing gaze locked onto mine.

His face gleamed beneath the silvered glow of the moonlight, making my heart beat heavily.

“Hukum,” I managed to whisper, though the word emerged slowly, more like a breath.

My cheeks burned, blushing so fiercely I had to turn away, folding my knees to one side; my thighs pressed together in an attempt to contain the storm swirling within me.

I gulped, breathing sharply. My chest heaved rhythmically. The rest of the chamber faded into a blur, and only the sound of our breath remained, caught between the tension that strung us together.

I tried to tug my slipping dupatta back into place across my chest with my trembling fingers. The soft jingle of my bangles grew louder in the quiet, betraying my frantic state.

And then his hand dragged the end of my braid.

The sound of my bangles grew louder when my arm instinctively moved to grasp the braid, trying to pull it free from his hold.

“Hukum,” a whisper of faint plea escaped my lips, tinged with urgency. My entire being felt like it was melting, unable to resist him.

His gaze sharpened, and with it, my heart stumbled in its frantic race. I tugged harder at my braid, but my strength was no match for him, and my hands trembled all the more.

He sat up, inching closer, making my breath hitch.

My eyes widened, and my lashes fluttered as I watched him lean in. I wanted to look away, but I couldn't. My gaze flickered helplessly between his eyes and lips, back and forth, unable to settle, finding it hard even to breathe.

A breeze whispered through the open gallery, swishing a loose curl to my cheek. I didn't want to be like that before him. I felt exposed and... vulnerable. A shameful heat crawled up my throat as I tried to steady the tremble of my hands.

We were sitting almost knee to knee, yet he leaned even closer, in a way his body angled towards mine, and my weight rested entirely on one arm. I could scarcely think.

My hand fell beside me on the carpet, splayed helplessly across my lehenga as my strength abandoned me completely.

“Hukum,” I tried to speak, but my voice dissolved into the air between us.

"I don't like you going away from me like this," he whispered.

My brows drew together as my eyes flicked to his mouth. It was so dangerously close that my heart nearly stopped.

My fingers fisted in my lehenga, feeling the nerves crawling all over my skin.

His gaze was... wanting, as if he wished to touch me with his lips. I could sense it.

Does he love me?

I had seen affection, gentle kisses bestowed on children. But I wasn't a child.

A nervous tremor rippled through me as I instinctively reclined back, seeking distance. Yet his hand reached out, encircling my wrist and fist.

My eyes snapped shut, and my breathing scattered into disarray as his lips brushed against my cheek, far too close to mine.

Heat bloomed in my stomach, trembling through my limbs, causing my entire body to shudder. My chest rose and fell in wild, shallow breaths as his lips felt soft against my skin.

I was dying from the sensation. From helplessness.

And then, an unmistakable twist occurred in my lower abdomen. A new warmth spread, and in a flash, I knew.

Menstruation.

He drew back slightly. "You are beautiful." The words fell from his mouth like velvet, but they struck me like a wave, and my eyes flew open.

I wanted to move away from him, but my limbs barely obeyed me, and my fingers trembled uncontrollably.

"Hu... Hukum, hum... humein gh...ghab...ghabraahat ho...rahi...hai. Hu... humaara swasthya th...theek nahi lag... raha." (Hu...kum, I... I am fe... feeling ner... nervous. It seems my health is not... well.) The words spilt in broken pieces from my mouth, and my voice shook so hard it hardly resembled my own.

I blinked, confused as a knowing smile slowly bloomed across his face.

"Don't worry. Nothing will happen unless you desire it."

I lowered my gaze, unable to meet his eyes. I needed to flee right away. The moment he released my wrist and let go of my braid, I seized the chance.

With trembling fingers, I pulled my dupatta hurriedly over my head, tucking loose strands of my hair behind my ear.

His voice followed me. "You should sleep now."

"Ji," I whispered, giving a disoriented nod, rising shakily to my feet.

But my legs felt weak, moving of their own accord, and I could barely see where I was going until I stumbled into the corner table.

A loud thud resonated through the room as a vase fell to the ground and broke.

"Careful, Aishwarya." His voice reached me softly, but it only made my heart race harder, so loud it throbbed in my ears.

I squeezed my eyes shut for a moment, trying to steady myself.

Calm down. Calm down. Calm down.

But no, it was impossible.

I've got to fix it soon. I'll have to ask him for the seeds. I cannot continue like this, trembling like a leaf in the wind.

"Ji," I barely managed to say.

Turning, I hurried back into the bedroom, hands shivering as I pressed one flat against my heaving chest.

It was pure madness; my heart thudded so violently it felt like it might burst through my ribs.

Calm down, Aishwarya. Calm down.

I remembered Jiji saying that kissing was a sign of likeness. It meant he liked me. And wasn't that a good thing?

Then why... why did I feel so? Why did it feel as though something was terribly wrong with me?

I rushed toward the bathing chamber.

Once inside, with frantic fingers, I yanked up my skirt to check for the blood I was sure must be there. My stomach twisted again with nerves, but my fingers came away dry. Nothing.

I tried again, but again, nothing.

What is happening?!

Confusion crashed through me, and I stood there frozen for a moment. I felt wet.

Did I... oh... oh no... did I pee? Shame washed over me like a heavy tide. It will smell. Oh no, oh no!!!

A strangled whimper escaped me as I yanked my skirt back down and scrubbed my hands clean.

What is wrong with you, Aishwarya?

I fled back into the bedroom, taking a deep breath as my eyes darted nervously around the space.

He wasn't there.

Relief and disappointment tangled within me like knotted threads.

With a pounding heart, I staggered to the bed and sat down. I slipped beneath the comforter, covering myself as though it might shield me from my own thoughts.

Sleep, Aishwarya. Sleep.

I shut my eyes tightly, but the memory returned.

I looked around the huge chamber, void of any sound but my breath. The dimly lit space was calm, yet my emotions were a flood, a river of chaos coursing through my insides.

Is he still outside?

The moment I lay back and closed my eyes, the feel of his lips against my cheek, the way it blurred everything else from my vision, and the way it left me breathless—that feeling lingered vibrantly.

And it no longer felt terrifying. It felt... good.

The sensations wouldn't let me be. They pressed against me from inside, fluttering in my stomach, making my thighs

tighten and my breath come unevenly. I clutched the comforter tighter.

His breath smelled so warm. His lips were soft. And his hand... his hand so comforting.

A tiny, shuddering breath escaped me. My hand moved, almost of its own accord, to brush my cheek where his lips had touched.

It wasn't scary anymore. It was... beautiful. But beautiful things shouldn't scare you, should they?

My eyes flew open.

What are you thinking, Aishwarya?!

I sat up abruptly, my heart hammering. *I'll have to do something, or I'll lose my mind.*

My eyes swept the room and then landed on the table across from me. Inkpot, paper, and a quill lay there.

I slipped out of bed and moved toward the table.

I lowered myself to the floor, sitting against the table. The soft fragrance hung around me, wrapping me in a sense of belonging.

Drawing the paper closer, I picked up the quill, but it slipped through my fingers. I frowned, determined.

No, hold it like he showed you.

After several failed tries, I finally managed to grasp it gently, yet firmly.

I dipped it carefully into the inkpot, watching the dark liquid cling to its tip.

He taught me how to make strokes, and so I tried to practice and focus on getting my mind right rather than letting other things distract me.

I took the quill out of the inkpot and brought it near the paper. A few drops of ink fell on the table as I might've dipped more than required.

Foolish me.

I placed the pen on the paper, but my hand felt a slight friction, making it difficult to move it across. The ink made

the paper wet in one spot; perhaps I had kept it in contact for too long.

But I had to learn.

I slowly moved the pen in a straight line.

And it didn't turn out to be completely straight, but it worked.

You can do it.

I tried to focus as much as I could to calm my brain and kept practising until I could do it effortlessly. Almost unknowingly, my lips began to hum my favourite song, as I found myself falling in love with the newfound bond between ink and paper.

It was beautiful how two things, so far apart from one another, seemed to complete each other. One melted willingly for the other, while the other softened to embrace it. Blank paper and solitary ink. Yet when they met, they became something meaningful.

I smiled and kept drawing lines, and I didn't know when I fell asleep.



“Aishwarya,”

I inhaled a deep breath and tried to open my heavy lashes, only to realise that Hukum was calling me.

My eyes landed upon the table, papers, and ink, and I immediately realised that I had fallen asleep there.

“Hey, get up,” I heard him say, and my gaze lifted to see him standing in front of me with a smile.

“I’m sorry,” I immediately corrected, adjusting my dupatta and standing up, when a sudden sprain hit my neck.

A soft cry escaped my lips, and he stepped closer.

“Are you okay?” he asked, concerned. I tried to avoid his eyes at any cost and nodded.

“Ji,” I managed to say, and a kind of uneasy silence followed before he said,

“We should get ready. We need to depart for the Temple.”

I nodded. “Ji,”

“Bhai-sa,”

Suddenly, the voice of Devarsa caught my ear, and I quietly eased away from him.

He turned to look at him walking inside, and Devarsa said, “You are not ready yet. We will be late.”

“What do you mean by we?” Hukum asked.

I looked at Devarsa, smiling widely at me, but then his brows creased together.

“Wait a moment... was ink served at dinner last night? Why do I always get missed?” Devarsa said, making me chuckle.

Hukum took a step forward. “Shut up, Agastya.” His tone turned firm, with a warning beneath it.

“Aww, Bhaisha, don’t worry. I know you will get bored without me because Bhabhisa does not speak anything except ‘ji’, that’s why I asked Bade Bhai-sa to let me tag along so that I can take care of you,” he said in a teasing tone.

“Shut up, Agas—”

“Bhabhisa,” he cut him off at once, striding past him towards me. “Oh, it seems the lessons have already begun,” he remarked, glancing playfully at the table before turning his gaze back to me. “Did you feed each other last night?”

“Agastya!” Hukum’s voice rang out, sharp with warning.

In a flash, Devarsa dashed away, laughing, and Hukum chased after him.

I laughed a little at the sight of them, and it reminded me of a few moments from my childhood, blurring my vision and making me well up with tears.

“What happened, Bai-sa?”

Moni’s voice caught my attention, and I quickly shook my head, wiping tears from my cheek.

“Nothing.”

She smiled softly and stepped a little closer. "It's okay to miss your family."

I lowered my gaze, lost in the thought of what family truly meant.

Being surrounded by hundreds of people every day sounded joyful and full of life. But I never knew what absolute joy and happiness were. Being surrounded by people didn't necessarily mean you had a family or friends. It was like a dense forest, full of trees and animals. From the outside, it looked lush and beautiful. But within, hungry creatures gnawed on leaves, destroyed crops, and hunted one another, for satisfaction, for anger, or simply to survive. Lions hunted deer. Deer grazed on the grass. Just like the surrounding people, those called 'family' hunted each other for their own gain—the same.

I inhaled a deep breath, my mind drifting to the day when my father had come to me and simply said I had to marry a man of his choosing. I bowed my head and agreed. What else could I have done?

"Let me help you get ready, Bai-sa," Moni said.

I lifted my gaze and came back to the present. "Ji."

Turning, I walked towards the bathroom. She helped me bathe, adding a few extra oils scented with lavender and cinnamon. They smelled sweet, yet they failed to bloom in my heart with that sweetness.

She washed my hair and then asked me to remove my inner garments. I hesitated, feeling painfully shy. No one had ever seen me naked, not even the reflection in my mirror. But this was my life now.

I unwrapped the cloth from my chest, letting it fall away. Moni looked at me and furrowed her brow.

"Bai-sa... you do not remove pubic hair?"

Timidly, I pressed my thighs together and covered myself with my hands, meeting her gaze. Her expression was not shocking; it was more casual, as though asking a simple question.

“Do I have to?”

She chuckled softly. “That is completely your choice. But cleaner is better. It is more attractive.”

I frowned. “Do all women do that?”

She shook her head. “No, it is an individual choice. Those who like it that way, leave it as it is. Others don’t.”

“Oh.” I thought for a moment, then asked, “Should I do that?”

She smiled and studied me briefly before saying, “I think you should. After many years of marriage, it may not matter so much. But when the spark is new, why douse it?”

I didn’t fully understand what she meant, but it sounded like it would be useful. Maybe I wouldn’t smell after that. Or maybe last night, when he was close, it was sweat that had made me feel warm down there... or was it something else?

Never mind. That discomfort will be gone soon.

“Okay.”

She asked gently, “Shall I do it now?”

Curious, I asked, “How do you remove it?”

Smiling, she replied, “Well, there are several ways. We can use blades, pluck them one by one, or apply thick sugar syrup and pull them.”

I gulped, slightly uncomfortable. “Will it hurt?”

She smiled. “It won’t if we use a blade. But a blade requires frequent use. Plucking can definitely cause pain and may cause lingering discomfort. Sugar syrup stings for a moment but slows down hair growth.”

As she rubbed bathing paste onto my arm, I asked, “How does this sugar syrup work? Who discovered it?”

She smiled and clicked her tongue. “I don’t know. There are many stories,” Pursing her lips, she looked afar, as though she was remembering something.

“Once, I heard of a lady who was making syrup for sweets. She fell asleep while the vessel was still on the stove. But when she woke up, it was late, and the firewood had burned out. While touching the thick, sticky syrup, a few drops

accidentally fell on her arm. As she tried to peel it off, her hair came out. And that's how it began, or so the story goes."

"Amazing," I whispered, wide-eyed. I had never known this. Suddenly, another question arose within me.

"Do men do it, too?"

She smiled brightly and lifted her gaze to meet mine. "Of course. They also want to be clean and attractive."

I lowered my gaze. "Oh."

That meant Hukum probably did it too.

It sounded strange, felt scary, but it was interesting.

I noticed the hair on his legs.

"Okay... I want that, but not now. We are already late to depart, and I think it will take time," I said.

She nodded. "Yes, it will."

I smiled softly, and she helped me finish my bath.

Afterwards, we both moved into the dressing room, where she helped me into a beautiful, richly embroidered red lehenga adorned with stones.

"This is beautiful," I breathed. When I looked at it closely, I realised it wasn't from my collection. It was new.

"Yes, it is. Hukum chose it for you," she replied.

I ran my fingers along the fabric. It was light, yet looked so grand.

"He did...?" A faint smile played on my lips. I asked her to help me put it on. It was so beautiful.

"You have such a tiny waist," she remarked with a playful smile. "Don't you eat anything, Bai-sa?" she teased, tilting her head as she tied the strings.

I looked down at my slender waist. My whole body was... frail. My ribs and midriff were too clearly visible. I hated it.

"You know... you'll fit in his arms perfectly," she added with a light laugh.

I frowned, not understanding why I should fit in his arms.

"Why would I have—"

"Aishwarya,"

Suddenly, Hukum's voice caught my attention. My heart jumped, and I instinctively grabbed my dupatta to cover my head and chest.

"Open the door," I whispered to Moni.

She went to the door and opened it.

There he stood, half-naked, draped only in a towel.

"You can leave," he told Moni.

At once, my heart began racing as Moni quietly exited and closed the door behind her.

I clenched my fist against the fabric of my lehenga. The memory of the previous night suddenly gripped my mind, leaving my body warm with a strange, nervous feeling.

As he walked closer, my eyes shamelessly followed the tiny droplets of water trickling from his hair down the side of his forehead, across his cheeks, and then slipping over his chest. His perfectly toned torso and narrow waist, unlike mine, displayed sculpted muscles that subtly shifted with each step.

"I'm sorry. Everyone is waiting for us," he said hurriedly, brushing past me to the trunk to retrieve his clothes.

My gaze lingered absentmindedly as he slipped a cream-coloured kurta over his neck and picked up the lower garment.

Realising myself, I spun away, fiddling nervously with the bangles on my wrist.

"Aishwarya."

I turned to face him. "Ji."

He looked striking in that colour.

"I think I need your help," he said.

I followed his gaze to his hand, where he held the broken fastener of his kurta.

"Oh... it broke," I murmured and went to retrieve my sewing kit from my trunk.

Threading a needle, I returned to him and waited, thinking he would remove the kurta so I could sew it easily, but instead, he stepped closer.

"We are getting late," he said softly.

Lowering my gaze, I realised he wanted me to sew it as he wore it.

"Ji," I managed to reply, feeling warmth rush to my cheeks.

I bent my head, focusing on the cloth and thread. My fingers felt cold against the warmth of the fabric, and my heart thudded furiously as I began sewing.

The only sounds between us were the gentle hisses of our breaths, twisting and fanning the air between us.

As I leaned in to break the thread, my dupatta slipped from my head, causing my heart to pound wildly.

"You have such a small waist. Don't you eat anything?"

His sudden comment, spoken while gazing at my reflection in the mirror, startled me. I quickly stepped back and pulled the veil over my head again, looking at his face. It was calm and unreadable.

"I do... but... people say that food does not..." He stepped closer. "... work on me."

My hand pressed against the edge of the table behind me as he approached. Every breath faltered as he leaned closer, brushing his cheek against my skin.

A sharp shiver coursed down my spine when he murmured, "Apart from dark ink, moonless nights, and the cosy corner of a dimly lit room with a book in my hand beside a flickering lamp... I love the fragrance of lavender."

My lashes fluttered closed. I had just taken a bath with lavender.

"Hukum," I breathed in a soft, unsteady voice.

He slowly leaned back, giving me space.

I opened my fluttering eyes to look at him. Swallowing hard, I lowered my gaze as he spoke. "I'll be waiting for you outside. And... thank you for this."

He touched my hand, gently lifting it from the edge of the table, and brought it close to his lips. He pressed a tender

kiss upon my trembling fingers, melting me entirely with the warmth of his touch.

Without another word, he walked away, leaving the chamber.

Moni returned and hurried to help me finish dressing. I hardly noticed what she was doing with my hair and jewellery, since my mind remained entirely captured by him.

Once ready, I stepped out to find him already waiting for me.

“Let’s go,” he said.

I instinctively tugged my veil a little lower, trying to at least cover my forehead. But before I could, he walked up to me, adjusted the veil properly over my head himself, and said softly, “When no one else can cherish what you have, learn to treasure it for yourself.”

I blinked, unsure of the meaning behind his words and too timid to ask.

Together, we began walking out of the chamber. I noticed a group of soldiers and attendees falling in behind us as we made our way through the grand corridors toward the main entrance.

Along the way, faded whispers and faint giggles reached my ears. I could feel watchful eyes following us.

A group of women stood in a corner, murmuring among themselves. One whispered something to another, and a loud peal of laughter echoed through the hall.

Suddenly, he took my hand in his.

I quickly dropped my gaze from them to the floor beneath my feet. Instinctively, I moved a little closer to him, shielding myself behind his presence. The less they saw of me, the less they would speak.

As we stepped out through the great door, my eyes fell upon Ranaji and Jiji.

I respectfully adjusted the side of my veil, lowering it in deference to him. He was the king and my elder brother-in-law.

“Aishwarya,” I heard Jiji’s warm voice as she came toward me, and I smiled, looking at her. “Look at you, glowing as always,” she said, pulling me gently into a hug. “Come, we’ll be sharing the palanquin,” she added with a smile.

I nodded and followed her to the beautifully decorated palanquin.

We settled inside, and soon I heard the muffled sounds of horses, bustling attendants, and the palanquin bearers preparing to move.

“Is it very far?” I asked, turning to her.

She nodded. “Yes, it is. There’s also a trek to reach the temple, so we had decided to make this a three-day trip. That’s why the full convoy is accompanying us.”

“Okay.” I nodded again.

I’ll surely pray to Devi Maa to help me rid myself of this sickness as soon as possible, I thought.

Suddenly, the palanquin bearers lifted us, and we began moving towards our destination.

“I hope you are feeling at home in the Palace, Aishwarya,” Jiji asked warmly.

I smiled. “Ji, Jiji.”

Though in truth, I was still trying to adjust, or perhaps it was more accurate to say that the palace itself was still adjusting to a royal bride like me.

“Don’t worry, it’ll only get better. Devarsa is the best man,” she added, and I inhaled softly.

“Jiji, you are so beautiful,” I blurted without thinking. I had always felt this way whenever I looked at her. I truly admired and respected her for her flawless complexion, the elegance of her face, and the natural warmth she carried.

She smiled. “What you see is only outer beauty, Aishwarya. Inside, we all still have much to discover about each other. I’m certain you will prove to be a thousand times more beautiful than I.”

A blush crept across my cheeks, and I smiled shyly.

Then she added, "By the way, I know you are still a new bride, but there are a few things you should know about these three brothers."

My brows furrowed slightly. "What is it, Jiji?"

She inhaled deeply and blinked as if gathering her thoughts.

"These three brothers are inseparable," she said softly, settling against the palanquin's wall. "They are each other's strength."

Glancing out through the sheer curtain, she spoke. "Ranaji and I had a complicated love-arranged marriage. He is strong and mature, but he can be quick to anger. When we used to speak before our marriage, he often mentioned his brothers,"

A soft sigh escaped her, and she continued again. "They lost their parents when they were very young. Rudra was just seven or eight, Ranvijay around four, and Agastya was barely a newborn. Rudra holds some memories of them, Ranvijay only a few, but Agastya never knew them at all. For him, his parents have always been Rudra and Ranvijay." By the end, her voice softened, but I looked at her, wide-eyed.

"Jiji, you call him by his name?" I asked, surprised.

She chuckled lightly and nodded. "Yes, I do, but only between us."

"Oh, that is beautiful," I said, and she smiled again. "That is why Devarsa is always so playful around them." I figured.

She nodded. "He seems a little frightened only around Rudra, but not at all around Ranvijay. And I suspect Ranvijay might be a little scared of Agastya sometimes," she remarked playfully, and I giggled at the thought.

"They love each other so much," I said.

"They do. That is why I never try to come between them. Whatever they decide for themselves, I always let them be. They have been through too much, and what they have built, they built on their own."

I frowned slightly. "What do you mean, Jiji?"

She sighed and continued. "Aishwarya, these three brothers were raised in a small cottage with the help of their Guruji and an aunt. Rudra used to work for the former king, who was their uncle. He was a cruel man. Though Rudra was the legal heir to the throne, the king refused to recognise him. Circumstances eventually forced Rudra to wage war against him, and he emerged victorious, winning the kingdom. Now, Ranvijay serves as chief advisor to the court of Suryagarh, and Agastya manages the kingdom's finances. But..." she paused briefly and looked into my eyes.

"... but they still have a long way to go. And we must be their strength," she said, holding my hands. "You and I, we come from royal kingdoms. We are princesses. But these princes... they never knew what it meant to be one. They struggled, worked hard for everything, slept on floors, sometimes beneath the open sky under a blanket of stars. They had never tasted royal food before. They are survivors, Aishwarya. And they are the finest of men. Each one of them is so deeply lovable,"

Caressing my hand, she smiled gently and added, "I'm sure Ranvijay has not troubled you. They do not issue commands or act as if they are entitled; they are always grateful. Truly, I could run out of words trying to describe them."

A wave of pain washed through my heart. So, he had never truly been a prince; he had never been treated as one. That must be why he slept outside last night.

My insides pulsed with quiet sorrow. "Oh... I didn't know all this, Jiji," I said softly.

A gentle smile curved on her lips. "Perhaps someday, Devarsa will tell you more himself. We can never fully know what weighs on his heart. He is calm and agreeable, but he has a sharp tongue. He speaks little, but when he does, his words are sharp. Rudra once told me that Ranvijay rarely loses his temper, but if he does, making amends with him is one of the hardest things in the world."

A slight shiver ran through me at her words. That was why he had pulled my braid: he didn't want me to leave. And I only wanted to run away. I would need to be more careful around him.

"I will always try not to make him angry," I said sincerely.

She smiled. "Don't worry. Anger only adds a bit of spice," she replied playfully.

But I disagreed. Anger can ruin everything.

After a pause, she asked quietly, "By the way... do you like him?"

My cheeks flushed hot with the question, but I managed a slight nod.

She smiled knowingly. "I knew it. He is a good man. You know, all the ladies in the palace stare at him so much, it makes him so uncomfortable sometimes."

And just like that, my smile vanished.

"Oh." That meant the way I had stared at him must have made him uncomfortable as well.

"I shouldn't do that. I'd have to take care of it from now on."

"But don't worry. I can bet he has never looked at any girl that way before," Jiji said, and I felt even worse.

But... I couldn't help it. He was so charming and handsome. His eyes pulled me in, and his face always left me mesmerised.

The conversation drifted on, touching on the past and family, until we reached our destination. I learned a great deal about him, discovering that he had always been an introverted, lonely kind of man, and that he respected Ranaji immensely, loving Agastya the most.

He was a good man.

By the time we arrived, darkness had fallen. The sky glittered with stars, though through the small crack in the palanquin curtains, I couldn't see the moon.

The bearers set the palanquin down, and Jiji said, "I think we have arrived."

I nodded softly and followed her out.

As I stepped down, I gasped softly at the breathtaking sight. We were by a river, its surface still as glass, shimmering with the reflection of the stars. It seemed to glow in the quiet night.

"We'll set up tents here. At first light tomorrow, we begin the trek to the temple," Ranaji announced in a loud voice, and I respectfully lowered my gaze.

Attendants and helpers were already bustling around, setting up tents for the entire convoy.

Suddenly, Jiji said, "You stay here, Aishwarya. I'll go help them."

I shook my head. "I want to help too, Jiji."

She smiled and shook her head firmly. "No, Aishwarya. You are the newlywed bride of Suryagarh. While I am here, you need not worry about anything."

I blinked, obeying her, though my heart was restless.

I stood alone, watching the flurry of activity around me. My eyes raked around the place in search of Hukum. And I found him standing in the distance, speaking with a group of attendants. His hand gestured this way and that, giving directions about the setup and preparations.

The bearers carried the palanquin away, and I remained standing there, watching the scene unfold. Ranaji stood deep in discussion with someone. It looked serious, perhaps political. His furrowed brows revealed his intense expression.

I shifted my gaze to Devarsa, who was helping the attendants quickly fix the tents. The workers were hammering large stakes into the ground with heavy hammers, tying the ropes securely in place. There were hundreds of attendants working in groups of about ten on each tent. Around fifteen tents were being set up in a neat, arranged formation.

Other attendants were fixing fire torches to the stands to keep the area well-lit as the night deepened.

The wind around was thinner, sharper, colder. In the distance, the faint, dark silhouettes of towering mountains rose against the sky, sending chills down my spine. I had never seen mountains before. The river must have been flowing down from those grand conquerors.

It was mesmerising.

Noise and movement surrounded me, and I turned back toward them.

I watched Jiji move from the group of women who were setting up the cooking area, arranging stoves and wood for the evening meal, toward Ranaji, asking him something.

I hesitated a moment, then started walking closer to the women. Standing idle was making me restless. I simply wanted to help, even if just a little.

But as I approached, I couldn't help but overhear their conversation, and I regretted it instantly.

"She does not deserve him at all," one of them said while stacking wood on the stove.

I drew a deep breath, lowered my gaze, and turned away.

So... they were talking about me. Again. Why did I always become the centre of such talk, even when I did nothing?

"Yes, have you seen her? She doesn't even look like a princess. No charm, no health. She looks like a poor, malnourished girl," another voice added.

Tears welled in my eyes.

I am a princess. My father is a king. And I do eat. My lips wobbled at the unsaid words.

"Shhh... She might hear you," came a softer warning voice.

But another whisper followed, "I am not lying. Just look at the Prince. I bet her father arranged this marriage so he would not get a proper look at her beforehand. I'm sure he regrets not having seen her before marriage now."

A tear slipped down my cheek, then another. My heart thudded painfully loudly in my chest.

I tried to steady myself, trying not to listen to their sharp words.

“Aishwarya.”

The sound of Hukum’s voice cut through the fog in my mind.

I hastily wiped the tears from my cheeks and turned to see him walking toward me. My heart pounded even harder.

He slowed his steps, flickering his gaze briefly toward the women, and then settled on me. I tried to look composed.

He smiled gently, and for a moment, I glanced at the women from the corner of my eye, then looked back at him, seeing him standing right in front of me.

“Are you okay?” he asked, and my eyes fluttered, trying to look anywhere but him. I didn’t want him to see my wet eyes.

Out of the corner of my eye, I absentmindedly noticed Devarsa standing a little way from us, and Ranaji and Jiji watching.

Suddenly, he touched my cheek, causing a sharp shiver to run down my spine at the coldness of his fingers, and I inhaled deeply. My gaze lifted to meet his for a fleeting moment.

I wanted to run. Somewhere. Anywhere... just away from him. I tried to step back, but he moved closer. And his warm touch froze me.

How did he always manage to steal my breath, to make me stare so blankly at him again?

He wouldn’t like it if I kept staring at him, I tried to remind myself. But my eyes refused to obey my mind.

As he stepped even closer, I felt smaller and more timid under the increasing closeness between us.

My heartbeat thundered, and my knees weakened. People were watching.

Why is he touching my cheek? What is he doing?

No... I didn’t want him to touch me again, not in front of everyone. I lost all sense whenever he touched me;

whenever he came near.

He shouldn't... he shouldn't... come closer.

But he did.

His eyes searched mine deeply, and I stared back helplessly, trying to read his intentions.

I expected his familiar line, 'You are beautiful,' but to my surprise, he said nothing. Just gazed silently.

My heartbeat slowly steadied, as if he was drawing all my attention away from the world and into him alone. The noises of hammering, the river's flow, distant giggles, scattered conversations, the soft rustle of insects, the cold breeze, and the earthy scent of mud and trees around us faded slowly into nothingness.

My eyes watched him breathe so calmly.

His thumb feathered my cheek gently, and I lowered my gaze to his lips.

In his deep, soft voice, after leaning in even closer, he whispered, "Do you know how to cast a spell?"

My brows furrowed watching his perfectly shaped lips move. I didn't understand a word.

"Huh?" A soft sound escaped my lips. I looked up into his eyes, which seemed to block out the entire world.

My heart raced wildly. My breath grew shaky. My chest rose and fell rapidly, as if burning from within.

"Because I feel... possessed," he murmured, and a powerful shiver coursed down my spine.

Before I could grasp anything, I felt his lips brush mine.

I lost my balance. My feet stumbled backwards in a tiny step, but he followed quickly, closing the gap, pressing his toes gently over mine, keeping me in place.

My eyes flickered nervously, and my mind was in a daze. *Everyone is watching*, my thoughts screamed, but my body betrayed me, unable to move.

When he pressed his lips firmer against mine, intense waves of shivers raced through me. My fists clenched my lehenga tightly, and my lashes fluttered rapidly; they felt

too heavy to hold open. My cheeks burned; my stomach twisted in a thousand knots.

Why did I feel as if I would faint? It was as though his lips had stolen the very strength from me.

My head tilted back instinctively when I felt his hand slide lower to the nape of my neck, pulling my face closer.

As our chests touched, his warmth seared through me, and suddenly the feeling of his soft lips drew me completely into him.

I felt him part his lips, gently moulding them to mine. And as he pressed them slowly against my own and pulled my lower lip between his, sucking it tenderly, I was left breathless.

When he pulled back for a moment, I gasped for air, eyes brimming with unshed tears, and my body was shaking from head to toe.

"Fuck...." he muttered under his breath, and then kissed me again. Harder, in a way, I had to give in.

My brain melted into nothing. Every thought vanished. There was only his mouth sucking my lips with desperate hunger, again... again... again.

Heat flooded my core. Not just warmth, but a kind of hotness that made my whole body feel flushed and raw.

"Hukum," I breathed against his lips, trembling uncontrollably.

My lips were slick with him.

And he slowly pulled back.

A tear rolled down my cheek. My legs threatened to give out beneath me. I swayed, but his following words caught me, steadying me in a rush of a thousand sensations deep in my stomach.

"You are my wife, Aishwarya," he spoke slowly, intensely, locking his eyes onto mine.

And suddenly, "OH MY GOD!!! BHA!-SA!"

Devarsa's loud, excited scream echoed through the air, and my heart palpitated with it. A strong shiver of fear ran

down my spine. I blinked nervously, unable to process what had just happened.

But I was sure I would die. They'd know of my sickness, and then no one would like me.

As tears rolled down my cheeks, I closed my eyes and lowered my gaze.

His palm was still resting against my cheek. But I didn't know what to do.

"You never kissed me in my twenty-two years of life!" Devarsa cried, wrapping his arms around his brother's shoulders from behind. "And she just came home two days ago, and you kissed her! Bhai-sa, this is not fair. I will die!" He was crying, and I felt even worse.

I took a small step back.

He tried to push Devarsa away coldly. "Shut up, Agastya," he said firmly, and everyone around burst into laughter.

I shrank timidly as I saw them all laughing at me.

Even Ranaji and Jiji were laughing. *What is happening?*

"No, Bhai-sa! Kiss me, please... on my lips, please, or I will not leave you! I'll sleep only with you!" Devarsa wailed dramatically, though there were no tears; only the sound of his voice seemed desperate.

Oh my God.

I had just done something to separate these brothers.

Suddenly, I felt a hand on my shoulder, and I turned to see Jiji smiling at me. "Are you okay?"

"Leave me, Agastya, or I will kill you," he warned him sharply.

"No! Kiss me first! At least on the cheek!" Agastya pleaded with wide, innocent eyes. And I stared at them blankly.

Then, Ranaji patted Devarsa's shoulder and said with a smile, "Come, Agastya. Let me kiss you. You can sleep with me tonight."

The laughter grew even louder.

I quickly pulled my veil lower to hide my face. I wished to disappear.

I took a few steps back, and Jiji looked at me gently. "You should go to your tent. It's ready," she said, signalling toward a tent nearby.

And I just needed to hear that, for I immediately ran inside.

My hands reached for my pounding heart. My small chest rose and fell so fast I thought I would die. My cheeks were burning with heat.

I collapsed to my knees, and my eyes squeezed shut.

Calm down, Aishwarya. It is not your fault. He did it. Hukum did it. Calm down.

I tried to steady my breath.

When I opened my eyes, I saw the attendants still setting up the low bed, which was half the size of the one in the palace, but still large enough for two.

I looked around, and except for the bed, there was nothing else.

Beneath me, a thick carpet had been spread out, and curtains encircled the space, giving it the feel of a small second home.

The lamps made the red tent glow warmly.

Suddenly, Moni said, "Bai-sa, your bed is ready. You should sit here."

I hadn't even noticed her coming in.

I looked at her and nodded. "Ji."

Standing up, I adjusted my dupatta properly and walked toward the bed.

Once the attendants left after finishing their work, Moni helped me sit down.

"Is everything okay, Bai-sa?" she asked gently, and I swallowed nervously.

Honestly, it should've been my question. Was everything okay?

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

"Ji," I whispered.

He is my husband. I should trust him. He knows better, I tried to reassure myself.

I looked at Moni again. She sat in front of me with a kind smile.

"I know it must be difficult to make your way in this new world. But everything will become beautiful soon," she said kindly.

I nodded and brought my knees close to my chest, resting my head upon them.

"I should go prepare dinner for you," she added softly.

I closed my eyes and heard her footsteps fade away, leaving me alone.

I didn't know what was happening to me.

With my eyes shut, the exact moment played over and over—him leaning closer, touching my cheek, then touching his lips to mine.

His smile. His lips. The way his nose brushed against mine, his warm breath against my skin, the strands of hair falling on his forehead, the words he had whispered...

I didn't know why, but it was playing on an endless loop.

Abruptly, I opened my eyes and touched my stomach.

I lay back on the pillow, knees still bent, staring at the centre of the tent roof.

But my mind drifted again... back to those women.

'She doesn't deserve him. She doesn't even look like a princess.'

They were right.

I looked at my dark, thin fingers, and a lone tear rolled down my cheek.

There was nothing in me to like or love. And he.... He was beautiful. People admired him.

The faded noise of chaos from outside was still travelling down my ear, and I immediately pulled up the comforter, covering both my ears.

No, I don't want to hear any of it one more time. Please.
No.

The indistinct voices of my sisters... the people... eyes, everywhere, on me.

'She suits the role of a maid.'

'Is she even a princess?'

'What kind of princess looks like her?'

'Daughter of a tribal mother.'

NO... Stop. My insides screamed.

The laughter of my sisters and of the people echoed around me. I couldn't silence those cruel voices. They struck my chest like a dagger.

I wanted to run. Run far, anywhere, away from their eyes, away from all of them.

"Aishwarya,"

I squeezed my eyes tightly. *No. No. No. No.*

"Aishwarya,"

My fists closed around the comforter, pressing it hard against my ears. I just wanted to run back to my home, my chamber, where no one knew I existed.

I don't exist. Please. No. No. My lips wobbled.

"Aishwarya,"

The voice grew louder, and I felt the bed dip beside me. I could feel him near. The shift in the mattress told me he had settled at the edge of the bed.

My hold tightened on the bedsheet, and a few more tears rolled down.

As I felt his hand on mine, I tried to calm the quivering in my heart.

"Hey, come here," he said, pulling me up, letting my head sink against his chest.

His heart was beating at a steady rhythmic pace. His warmth sent a wave of peace through my body.

I felt his palm resting on my head, patting it gently.

I closed my eyes, breathing in and out, my mind slowly drifting toward the soft thudding of his heart.

My fingers curled into his kurta, and little by little, the surrounding noise faded away. When I finally opened my eyes, the world felt peaceful.

He wrapped his arm around me, holding me close, and I looked up at him.

In a low, gentle voice, he asked, "Are you okay?"

I nodded softly and straightened myself, pulling my dupatta over my head.

Shifting a little away from him, I lowered my gaze to my lap. An awkward silence hung heavily between us.

"Aishwarya, do you want to talk?" he asked, and I inhaled deeply.

I didn't understand what he was talking about, but I nodded. "Ji."

He came closer and held my hand, gently caressing its back. "Does it matter what people think about you?" he asked.

Pursing my lips, I nodded. "Ji."

"Why?" he questioned.

I looked up at him. "They think I'm not good enough, that I don't deserve you or anything." A huge lump formed in my throat as I finally voiced the words for the first time in my life and looked at our intertwined fingers.

He looked into my eyes and asked softly, "Does the way people think about you change you?"

I blinked nervously and shook my head. "No."

I didn't think I could change the way I looked. I couldn't change my colour, couldn't change who I was, because it was all how God had made me.

"So, if what people say about you, or think about you, cannot change you... Why even bother to listen to them?" he asked.

I just shook my head lightly. "But... I cannot cover my ears all the time. And what they say is true... I don't deserve you," I whispered.

Silence hung between us for a few long moments until he finally said, "If you repeat that one more time, I will send you back to your home and never come to bring you back."

A shiver of fear ran down my spine, and I gulped nervously. His face was expressionless, and I lowered my gaze.

"I'm sorry," I murmured, afraid I had angered him with my words.

He clicked his tongue with slight irritation. "Okay. Come here," he said, pulling me closer.

He pecked my forehead and whispered, "Aishwarya, life is cruel to the weak. You are different from everyone else. And that is your greatest quality. You are not just one of the crowd."

I blinked nervously.

No one had ever said this to me. He was perhaps trying to make me feel good.

He touched my chin and tilted my face up. "Look at me." I met his eyes and found him gazing intensely back at me. "Do you feel uncomfortable knowing that they think I am beautiful and you are not?" he asked, and I nodded. "And... do you think they have their eyes on me?" he asked further.

I nodded again. "Ji."

He smiled and pulled me even closer.

I noticed his lips turn wet as he licked his lower lip lightly, just for a fraction of a moment.

"Can you stop them from having their eyes on me?" he asked.

I slowly, hesitantly shook my head. "No."

"Can you stop me?" he asked next.

"For what?" I countered in a low tone.

Our faces were so close.

"For having eyes only for them?"

I took a deep breath. Hearing this churned something deep in my heart, and I blinked nervously.

His thumb feathered my chin softly as I tried to shake my head.

"You don't have to... if you want," I whispered.

He smiled and kissed my cheek lightly, causing my nerves to flutter.

"Does it feel good when I kiss you?" he questioned.

I couldn't help but nod. "Ji."

"Do you want me to kiss you more?" he asked, and I blinked nervously.

"I... I haven't thought about it," I said softly.

I could feel his breath fanning over my face. My eyes stayed locked with his when he spoke again.

"I have eyes only for you, Aishwarya. No one else."

I swallowed nervously, trying to speak. "But... I'm not good for you. You deserve better."

My eyes fluttered uncontrollably as he inched closer to me.

"We are married. As much as you are bound to me, I'm bound to you. There is no chance for you to escape me. And there are no two thoughts in my mind to let you go. So, you'd better understand this that you are the wife of Prince Ranvijay Dev Singh, Aishwarya." His voice slowed as he spoke.

"For me, the definition of perfection is you. I've never laid my eyes on any other woman in my life before you. I find myself utterly incapable of seeing what beauty is beyond you. If someone were to ask me what beauty means to me... I have no answer but you, Aishwarya. You are the most beautiful girl in the world. Do you understand what I am saying?"

His words sent chills down my spine.

"Huh?" I whispered, already losing myself to him and his words.

"I'm saying that I am only yours."

My face flushed deep red.

“Hukum, dinner is ready,” the attendant’s voice caught my attention, and I quickly tried to pull away.

I saw him glance toward the entrance and say, “Bring it in. And get a glass of warm milk with sugar for Aishwarya.”

“Hukum, I don’t drink milk,” I quickly said.

He looked at me as the attendant left. “You’ll have to drink milk every night before going to bed. It is an order,” he said firmly.

“I get nauseated when I drink milk,” I tried to protest.

“If you vomit, I will make you drink another glass,” he replied, his expression leaving no room for debate.

“Okay... I will drink it. But you have to do something,” I said softly.

He looked at me. “What?”

I inhaled deeply, summoning all my courage to speak.

“What you did... outside... made Devarsa angry. Please... kiss him too. He is your brother. He deserves your love even more than I do.”



4. Ranvijay

“W

hat?” I asked in complete shock.

What the hell is she saying?

She lifted her timid gaze to me, inhaling slightly before speaking in a low voice. “I’m sorry, Hukum, but he is your younger brother, and he has more rights over you than me. I didn’t like that he got upset seeing you kiss my lips.”

OH MY GOD!!!

I was thunderstruck. *What the hell?*

Did that mean... that she knew nothing about...?

Suddenly, my brain emptied of all thoughts. I couldn’t even process this unknown fact I had just discovered about her.

But how much did she know?

“So, Aishwarya, you want me to kiss Agastya on the... lips to show him my love?” I asked, narrowing my eyes, to give out how serious I was.

She stared blankly into my eyes and nodded. “Ji.”

I tried to bite back my laughter. “Oh? Are you sure?” I asked.

“Ji.” She nodded again, and I lowered my face to hide the bubble of laughter threatening to burst. I didn’t want to hurt her feelings.

“You will do it, right?” She asked suddenly.

I didn’t respond briefly, but then looked into her eyes and said, “Yes. But you’ll have to do something for me. Only then will I kiss him... in a private place.”

She blinked, confused. “What is it?” she asked.

I bit my lower lip, frowning at her. Pulling her closer, I gently held her chin and slowly brought her face nearer.

She gulped, her lashes fluttering nervously. My gaze locked on hers as I asked, “You’ll have to kiss me... on my

cheek. Right now,”

As her face turned a deep shade of red, she immediately lowered her gaze. “Hukum, what are you saying?”

My lips curved into a soft smile, seeing her blush, turning timid under my gaze. “Don’t you get it?” I asked.

She looked nervously at me. And the way her chest rose and fell, I could tell how her heart was beating madly; I could almost hear it.

I bit my lower lip again to hold my smile. “Do it, Aishwarya,” I said softly.

Her breathing turned shaky, and her lips started trembling.

I remembered how terribly soft her lips had felt when I kissed her earlier. There was no particular taste to them, yet they were so satiating. The way they had quivered beneath mine... I could kiss her all night, senselessly, and watch her turn flushed and blushing repeatedly.

Her gaze met mine again, and I smiled softly.

She was breathing heavily and muttered in a low voice, “ji.”

Her eyes flickered, and her gaze fixed on my cheek as she slowly, nervously leaned closer.

I tilted my face slightly toward her. “Aishwarya,” I called in a low voice.

She opened her eyes and looked into mine timidly. As I placed a finger gently under her chin, her eyes blinked nervously, and her parted lips quivered.

I leaned closer and whispered, “Come on, I’m yours.”

She lowered her gaze to my lips and lifted her eyes to mine again. Though her blinking slowed, I could hear her thudding heart.

She dropped her gaze again to my lips. Slowly, she moved closer, squeezing her eyes shut again. Her trembling lips touched my cheek, just beside my lips, making my lips curve into a slight smile.

“Hukum, dinner.” Suddenly, an attendant’s voice from outside reached my ears.

She instantly backed away, stood up, and swiftly arranged her dupatta.

I shifted my gaze from her to the attendants as they came in and placed a plate on the bed.

“Come,” I said. “Thank you,” I added to the attendants, who placed the dinner plates for us and left.

“Come here, Aishwarya,” I said quietly.

Finding her blinking nervously, I smiled to ease the tension, earning a sweet smile from her in return, and she sat before me.

“What do you like to eat the most?” I asked.

She reluctantly lowered her gaze, looking at the plate. “Anything,” she answered softly.

“No, there must be something you like.” I smiled.

She nervously fiddled with her bangles. “No... nothing in particular,” she replied cautiously, waiting for me to start.

“Come on,” I encouraged her gently.

She blinked restlessly for a moment, then hesitantly reached for the plate. She tore a small bite and brought it to her mouth.

I joined her, letting silence follow, because she needed the space to calm down.

A lot had happened after our wedding. And this new fact I had learned about her made me feel that I needed to take everything slowly and calmly with her.

The way she reacted to the attendants' words seemed to stem less from their words and more from something deep within her.

And I couldn't help but wonder if she had suffered the same hatred within her family or palace as well.

However, she appeared to love her father dearly, which confused me. I couldn't understand it fully.

“Aishwarya, is there something I should know?” I asked, unable to keep it inside anymore.

She stopped halfway, her face paling as she raised her eyes to meet mine. Her eyes conveyed a deep sense of pain.

She shook her head lightly, and I nodded silently, continuing to eat.

After we finished, an attendant came in to take the plates and handed me a glass of warm, sweetened milk.

Aishwarya walked toward me, her eyes fixed on the glass, and from her displeased expression, it was clear she wasn't very fond of milk.

I extended the glass toward her, and she took it hesitantly.

I waited for a few moments. It looked like she wanted to run away from here altogether.

"Hukum... I think I cannot," she whispered, giving me innocent, puppy-like eyes.

I stepped forward and took the glass from her hands.

She looked at me in confusion, and I said, "Take off your nose ring."

Her brows drew together in even greater confusion and shock, but hesitantly, she obeyed. Her breath raced as she removed her nose ring and looked at me nervously.

I brought my hand close to her face, pinching her nose gently but firmly between my index finger and thumb.

Her chest began to puff and swell with short, rapid breaths. Quickly, I brought the glass to her lips.

As her mouth opened for breath, she ended up taking the milk in and gulping it down in quick sips.

"Argh..." she gasped for air as she finished, and I released her nose.

Huffing desperately, she looked at me, shocked and angry.

"Good girl," I muttered with a smile.

She coughed slightly, covering her mouth perhaps to prevent herself from throwing up. "Don't you dare, Aishwarya," I warned.

She shut her eyes, looking away from me toward the opposite side of the tent.

I waited a few moments until she slowly turned back to face me.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

She nodded. "Ji."

I saw the wetness lingering in her eyes. "Now, go to bed." She bit her lower lip and obediently sat on the bed. "I have some work to do," I said, and she nodded.

I stepped out of the tent with an empty glass in my hand. After handing it to an attendant, I went to meet Bhai-sa.

With the reconstruction of the outskirts of the palace about to begin, I needed to discuss the deal I had entered with Aishwarya's father.

"Bhai-sa," I greeted, walking to him.

He turned to look at me.

"You can leave," Bhai-sa said to the man he'd been speaking with, then looked back at me. "Everything good?" he asked with a teasing glint in his eyes.

I felt a blush threaten me. He was like a father figure, and I felt shy in his presence.

"Ji, Bhai-sa."

He smiled playfully. "So... what made you give everyone such a spectacular performance today?" he asked, chuckling softly.

I wanted to melt with shame. "Bhai-sa, please... she was looking beautiful," I mumbled the last line.

"Oh, yes," he said, placing a hand on my shoulder as we strolled together.

"So... what have you thought about telling Aishwarya?" he asked, inhaling deeply.

"Nothing. I don't want to tell her anything that would unnecessarily hurt her. It has nothing to do with the bond that we share."

He clicked his tongue and stopped walking, turning to look at me.

"But Ranvijay, she should know. If it concerns her, then she deserves to know."

I wasn't sure about that because I didn't want to cause her tears, especially concerning someone she loved the most.

"Okay, Bhai-sa. I'll think about it," I said quietly, glancing around. Everyone seemed settled in their tents. "You should rest too, Bhai-sa."

He nodded. "Of course. And remember, we'll depart early tomorrow morning. Be ready on time."

"Ji, Bhai-sa," I smiled and bid him goodnight.

Returning to my tent, I found her already asleep.

I smiled softly at her peaceful face. She looked so beautiful asleep.

Looking around for another place to sleep, I found none. Finally, I moved toward the untouched side of the bed.

Carefully, I slipped under the comforter. And suddenly she shifted. I froze, wondering if I had disturbed her.

But she seemed to be still asleep, though lightly.

I placed my head carefully on the pillow, making sure not to touch her or wake her.

Closing my eyes, I drifted off soon enough.



5. Aishwarya

Waves of cold shivers made me pull my knees closer to my chest. I pulled the comforter up to my ears, trying to shield myself, but the chilly winds tearing through the fabric of the tent sent sharp shivers through my body in the middle of the night.

The cold seeped into my sleep, waking me. I opened my eyes to the darkness enclosing me like a cage. Inhaling deeply, I adjusted the comforter, trying to block every gap where the cold might sneak in. The soft clink of my bangles made me pause, alerting me that I wasn't alone in the tent.

I shouldn't move so much.

Slowly, I turned my head and found him sleeping on the other side of the bed, facing me.

His eyes were closed, allowing his beautiful lashes to rest after a day of constant blinking. My eyes lingered on his face, mesmerised by how calm and peaceful he looked in sleep. No one would believe he had lived through such a painful past just by looking at him. Maybe he had learned to hide his emotions, but that still overwhelmed me... or maybe nothing affected him anymore.

Either way, he was slowly becoming an inspiration to me.

Even in sleep, I felt drawn to him. His still lips seemed to call me closer, to feel the warmth radiating from his body. But what would he think of me?

I blinked nervously and shifted slightly to face him. The delicate jingle of my anklets made me freeze.

But how would he know if I moved closer consciously? People shift in bed all the time, don't they? It seemed like a good enough excuse.

Still, my heart was racing just at the thought. My cold fingers trembled with nervousness.

I shouldn't move closer.

But why not? He was my husband, and he said he was mine, that he had eyes only for me.

What if I disturbed him? But... what if I fell sick? I wouldn't be able to travel with him to the temple.

Maybe he wouldn't even notice. Or maybe he would.

I bit my lower lip as my heart raced at such thoughts. It felt wrong... but part of me wanted it.

I looked around. There was no other option. Closing my eyes, I tried to calm myself before slowly shifting closer to him. I moved inch by inch, taking extreme care not to let my bangles or anklets make a sound.

We were just a foot apart. I looked at his face, but I still couldn't feel his warmth. There was too much space.

With a nervous breath, I lifted myself and moved closer again, as silently as I could.

Suddenly, I lost my balance, and my arm brushed against his. I froze and quickly shut my eyes, pretending to sleep.

God, please save me. Don't let him wake up. Please. I'm not doing this on purpose. I'm cold, and I have a fever.

Fear sent shivers across my chest, followed by goosebumps.

Suddenly, he touched my arm, making my heart thunder. I couldn't move an inch. He was awake. I had woken him.

I'm dead.

"Hey," I heard his indistinct murmur, and I felt his hand adjusting the comforter.

My eyes fluttered open.

Sensation rippled through my body, knowing he might touch me again. I lay frozen, timid beyond reason.

"Come here," he said.

And just like that, he wrapped an arm around me, over the comforter, and pulled me close in a single, effortless motion.

My eyes widened in shock. "Hukum," I breathed.

He was strong. The way he pulled me without effort sent a twist through my stomach. Our chests touched, and I stared into his eyes.

I shivered when I felt his palm slide to my cheek, then the back of my head, gently pressing my face to his chest.

I blinked nervously. The warmth of his body seeped into me, bubbling heat through my limbs. My forehead rested against his chest as he tugged the comforter over my head, leaving just enough space to breathe.

My hands, trapped between us, trembled.

I shut my eyes tightly, pretending I wasn't touching him, he wasn't touching me, and I was feeling absolutely nothing.

But then, he reached for my wrist, gently pulled my arm from between us, and wrapped it around his torso.

My heart pounded wildly.

His arm slid around my waist again, pulling me even closer. My knees touched his thighs, and I instinctively straightened my legs, which made my feet brush against his ankles.

"You've got a fever," he mumbled against my forehead. I said nothing. I was sure he could feel my pulse... my uneven breath. "Are you comfortable?" he asked softly.

I inhaled and nodded slightly. "Ji," I responded, though my hand trembled with confusion as he guided it across his midriff. I wasn't sure if I had the strength to rest my weight on him.

"Are you sure, Aishwarya?" he asked again, and I didn't know what to say.

Yes, I was sure that I was comfortable with him, but a bigger part of me felt frightened, nervous, and confused being so close to him. My body was burning against his warmth. My heart was racing wildly, and my breathing made me feel strange... terrifying things. I pressed my thighs together as a contraction twisted in my lower abdomen, like the urge to pee, but I knew it wasn't that.

I didn't know what I wanted. A part of me wanted to run far away. But another part of me wanted to stay in his embrace all night, feel his warmth and calmness, let it soothe me, carry me with him. And yet, somewhere deep

inside, I knew he was making me feel things I wasn't ready to handle... not before I had his seeds.

Oh, seeds... I needed to ask him about them. But I didn't even know whether he had brought them here.

My arm began to ache slightly from hovering midair for so long. I didn't know whether I should place my hand on his waist or pull it back.

But then I noticed his eyes were closed again. He was breathing calmly, which only meant he was asleep again. If I moved my hand back, my bangles might jingle and wake him up.

But why take my hand back? He was my husband. He told me he had eyes only for me, which meant I had every right to keep my hand on him, just like he kept his on me. The only difference was his hand rested over the comforter... and I was touching him directly.

Still, I could pretend to be asleep. Yes, that was a good idea.

I inhaled deeply and shut my eyes tightly.

Then, slowly, I rested my palm on his back, letting the weight of my hand fall onto him.

And the moment I felt the warmth of his body under my hand, a tight knot coiled in my stomach.

Oh, my God!

I pressed my face against his chest and focused on my breathing. My thighs squeezed together even more, and I couldn't help but curl my fingers into his kurta, trying to still myself and return to sleep.

He must have felt it, because he pulled me closer, almost suffocating me, and a small smile appeared on my lips without warning.

Slowly, his warmth engulfed me, pushing out the chills until only heat remained. I didn't know when I drifted off... but I woke when that heat became too much for me to bear.

I took a deep breath and felt the wetness of sweat between our bodies. My blouse was damp, clinging to my

skin. My hair was damp too, and my back radiated heat.

I opened my eyes after a sleep that felt incredibly deep and looked ahead. I could still feel him behind me.

The comforter had slipped down below my waist, and to my horror, I noticed my dupatta was missing.

My hand darted to my revealing chest and waist. I looked around quickly, only to find the dupatta bunched beneath me. I let out a quiet breath of frustration.

But the true panic hit the next moment, when I felt his movement behind me.

I tried to sit up quickly, but another wave of terror surged through me when I realised the strings of my blouse had come undone. My hand flew to my chest, trying to hold the blouse in place.

I turned to look at him. He was still sleeping. But then I noticed my blouse string and my dupatta were both stuck under him.

Oh, my God. Internally, I screamed.

I wanted to run.

Just then, he took a deep breath, and I shut my eyes immediately, not wanting him to see me like that.

He shifted slightly, and I lay back down, squeezing my eyes tightly.

"I know you're awake," he whispered.

I felt like I was drowning in a deep lake of shame. I wanted to scream with embarrassment.

"Are you okay now?" he asked, and I didn't know how to respond.

My heart thundered in my chest as he shifted again and gently placed my dupatta over my arm.

"Here. Take it," he said.

I grabbed it quickly and turned slightly to look at him.

He gave a faint smile. "Good morning," he said, and I didn't miss the hint of teasing in his tone.

I didn't know how to tell him... the string of my blouse was still trapped under him.

I blinked nervously, trying to find my voice.

“Hukum... humaari... humaari dori... wo humaara arth hai ki, humaari ch... choli ki dori... aapke... neeche...” (Hukum, the... the string... I mean, the string of my blo... blouse is under... you...)

“Oh,” he said quickly, even before I could finish, and moved to let it free.

I tried to cover myself with the dupatta and sit up.

But he suddenly held my forearm. “Wait,” he stopped me gently. “Let me help.”

And there... I couldn't say anything.

My gaze dropped to the bedding as I sat frozen, turning my back to him. The bare skin of my half-open blouse felt exposed under his gaze. Sensations fluttered in my stomach, and I swallowed hard.

My mind shouted at me to cover up and step back. I couldn't stand the idea of him seeing my dark-skinned back.

But he deserved to see what belonged to him. He deserved to know what he had chosen.

The dupatta slipped from my shoulder when I felt his fingers in my braid, pushing it forward. Instinctively, I grabbed the end. My heart hammered, breath rose, knowing I would feel his touch any moment.

My fist tightened around my braid as I nervously fiddled with the strands of hair around my finger. Every passing moment felt like an eternity as I sat before him, giving him full access to my bare back.

My lashes fluttered anxiously when I felt the sleeve of my slightly loose blouse slipping down my shoulder. I was frozen as if I had turned into stone.

The weight of his gaze on my almost bare back made me feel timid in a way I had never experienced before.

My other hand rested beside me on the bed, and my gaze dropped to my lap, where I stared blankly at the beautiful embroidery on my lehenga.

After a long silence that felt like a lifetime, I sensed his hand inching closer to touch my back.

He didn't touch me yet, but I could feel him. Not just his hand, but his gaze. His calm breath tickled my skin.

My lashes blinked rapidly, and I felt a wave of sensations ripple through my body, leaving goosebumps all over my back and face as the tip of his finger teasingly touched my spine, tracing the line where the string of my blouse should have been tied.

My back straightened instantly, and I shut my eyes tightly. My heart pounded wildly in my chest, and with just that slight movement, his finger withdrew.

When a few moments passed, I opened my eyes again, shivering nervously, waiting for his next move.

I gulped and closed my eyes once more when I felt him touch the ends of the string and slowly begin to pull them together. I lifted my hand to adjust the sleeve and settle it in place.

A timid smile crept onto my lips. "Hukum," I called softly.

"Ji," he answered in the same low voice, still tying the knot.

"Humein kuch kehna tha aapse," (I wanted to tell you something.) I spoke carefully.

"Kahiye," (Tell me.) he replied.

My fingers trembled uncontrollably; I could feel the timidity seeping through every pore of my body.

I tried to calm myself. I had to ask him about the seeds before it was too late.

But the sickness in me hadn't faded. In fact, it was rising again with every accidental touch of his fingers against my back. It wasn't getting any better.

As he withdrew his hands, I realised he had finished tying the knot. My heart was still racing when, suddenly, I felt his soft, warm lips touch just below my nape, and the strongest shiver I had ever felt coursed through my body.

I immediately turned to look at him in shock, and he smiled faintly.

Why... why was he kissing me everywhere?

But then, my eyes softened. I stared deeply into his gaze. Once again, I felt myself drowning in his eyes. The tent was still dark, yet somehow, I could still see him.

"What is it?" he asked, and I noticed his gaze flicker down to my lips.

I didn't know how to ask him.

I gulped and shifted slightly, creating a slight distance between us.

"Hukum... I want to know... if yo... you can... giv... I mean, if you can give me... your seeds."

Confusion flickered across his face as he raised his eyebrows slightly. "My seeds?"

I nodded lightly. "Ji."

He lowered his gaze and, after a few moments of silence, I saw his lips curve into a faint smile. His brows thinned slightly, and he muttered softly, "Oh."

My stomach twisted at his reaction. He hadn't said yes. He hadn't even told whether or not he liked me.

Why would he give me his seeds?

"Why do you want... my seeds?" he asked casually.

I dropped my gaze to my lehenga and tried to speak. "I think it will help me get over the sickness."

"You are sick?" he asked immediately, concern flashing in his voice.

I looked up at him and nodded. "Yes."

He smiled gently. "So, what is happening to you?"

"I don't know... but I feel something in my stomach. I feel sudden shivers."

He narrowed his eyes slightly, then brushed his finger lightly along my arm. Once again, my heartbeat jumped, and my breath caught in my throat. I blinked nervously, unsure of what he was doing to me.

"Oh... Like this?" he asked.

I nodded quickly. "Ji."

He smiled again, wider.

"All right. I will give them to you. But you see, I haven't brought them here. They're in my almirah. So whenever we return home, remind me."

I nodded, relieved. "Ji," I breathed, and a small smile appeared on my face.

"But..." he added immediately, "...you have to do something in return,"

The smile vanished from my face; my heart skipped a few beats, and my mind recalled what he had asked me to do before, as well as how I had felt about it.

"What?" Still, I asked in a soft, shaky voice.

He smiled slightly and said, "You have to kiss me... on my lips."

The moment his words travelled into my ear, a strong shiver ran down my spine, and my heart began pounding at a frantic pace.

"What???" My voice came out shaky, and he immediately replied,

"Whenever you're ready. No force."

I blinked nervously and lowered my gaze.

Thank God. A wave of relief passed through me, but it only lasted a moment.

Suddenly, he leaned in and brushed his lips against mine, just for a fraction of a second.

"But... I can whenever I want."

My eyes widened, and my stomach somersaulted. What was he doing to me?

He smiled and moved off the bed, saying, "We should get ready."

I gulped nervously and watched him step out of the tent.

My hand flew to my chest, which felt heavy and tight. The lingering sensations stirred my nerves, and I closed my eyes.

It'll be alright soon. I just have to remind him about the seeds once we get back home. It would all be good, Aishwarya. All you need... is a baby. Everything will be all right.

"Bai-sa," Moni's voice suddenly caught my ear, and I shivered slightly.

"Ji," I said, turning to her.

"Time for your bath. Rani-sa has asked you to get ready," she informed me, and I nodded.

"Okay."

I stepped down from the bed, and she guided me to another tent nearby. A hole was dug in the earth for relief, and a bucket full of water was placed there.

Moni glanced at me and said, "You bathe. I'll get your clothes."

Once she left, I finished my morning business and quickly took a bath.

Soon, she returned and helped me get dressed. The clothes were simple, with nothing extravagant or royal about them.

"Rani-sa asked for simple clothes for the visit," she explained, and I nodded.

Once back in my tent, Moni helped me dry my hair. Hukum hadn't returned, and I assumed he must already be ready.

I glanced at myself in the mirror, dressed in plain red clothes with minimal jewellery. I filled the vermilion in the parting of my hair and placed the dupatta over my head.

"Everyone is waiting for you outside," Moni said, and I nodded.

I stepped out and saw Jiji and Ranaji speaking to each other.

Jiji noticed me and walked over. "You're looking beautiful," she said, smiling. She was also dressed in red.

I smiled softly and bent to touch her feet, but she stopped me with a hand on my shoulder. "I told you not to touch my

feet.”

I smiled again, and then my eyes caught sight of Hukum standing at a distance, speaking to someone. He looked breathtaking in white. Effortlessly handsome.

“So... did you sleep well?” Jiji’s voice brought me back, and I quickly turned my gaze to her.

“Ji,” I answered softly.

She smiled and said, “We’re just waiting for Agastya. Only five of us, along with a few attendants and soldiers, will go to the temple. The rest of the convoy will wait here.”

I nodded. “I’m ready.”

Just then, Devarsa’s voice called out, “I am ready too!”

Jiji turned to him. “Come.”

I walked with her, glancing at Ranaji, Hukum, and Devarsa, all dressed in white. Jiji moved to stand beside Ranaji, while Hukum came to my side.

“Come. Let’s go,” he said gently.

We began walking toward the mountains.

My eyes scanned the horizon. The temple wasn’t visible yet. It wasn’t a gigantic mountain. Even so, I could tell our destination was not close either.

The path was uneven and muddy, but we kept walking steadily. After some time, we reached the forest edge.

Hukum’s hand brushed mine, and at one point, he gently held it. Though we weren’t walking together step by step, we moved in rhythm, sometimes before, sometimes after.

Ranaji and Jiji led the way, while Devarsa walked ahead of us all, full of energy. He held a long wooden stick and looked entirely too happy.

There was laughter, teasing, and light talk. I was feeling good.

“Bhabhi-sa, be careful,” Devar-sa called out, “I’ve heard the tigers here feast on shy, innocent people!”

I smiled at his remark. I knew he was joking, and everyone laughed.

“Stop teasing her,” Jiji warned him.

The earthy smell of trees, leaves, and the slightly damp ground lifted my spirits. I had never seen a forest like this before. The trees were tall with thick trunks, casting heavy shadows.

Suddenly, my foot slipped, and I gasped, but before I could fall, I landed in his arms.

My heartbeat spiked immediately.

"Careful," he said, steadying me.

I looked up at him, breathless, then quickly corrected my dupatta and straightened myself.

Soon after, we emerged from the forest and began climbing the mountain. A narrow path carved by the locals guided us up. But it was uneven, full of stones, and difficult to walk on.

But we kept climbing. I could feel my knees growing weak and my heartbeat racing.

"Bhai-sa," suddenly, Devar-sa's voice caught our attention as he walked back toward us.

Hukum took a deep breath just at the sight of him and gritted his teeth.

"Bhai-sa, I'm getting tired," Devar-sa said, draping his arm across Hukum's shoulder and leaning heavily on him.

"Shut up, Agastya, and keep walking," Hukum said, pushing him off.

Devarsa made a sad face and pleaded, "No... lift me, please."

I smiled quietly, watching the two of them. And then, suddenly, Devar-sa leapt onto Hukum's back, just like a child would sit on his father's back.

I burst into laughter and quickly placed my hand over my mouth to muffle the sound. But my laughter faded when Hukum glanced at me.

He pushed Agastya off and snapped, "I'll throw you off from here."

I smiled and lowered my gaze.

“Yes, yes... now you’ll only lift Bhabhi-sa in your arms. I’m watching you,” Devarsa teased.

“Shut up, Agastya.” Suddenly, Ranaji’s voice boomed from ahead, catching all of us off guard.

And everyone burst into laughter.

“Bhai-sa, you too?” Devar-sa whined playfully, pouting at Ranaji.

Hukum looked at him with apparent frustration and finally muttered, “Okay, fine. Just for a while.” Devar-sa immediately beamed and climbed onto his back again. “You’re so heavy! You’re not a child anymore,” Hukum complained.

“Not heavier than Bhabhi-sa,” Devar-sa said with a cheeky grin, and I laughed again.

Cute. And stupid.



After a long and exhausting trek, we finally reached the gateway to the temple. With empty stomachs but hearts full of contentment, we climbed the last few steps.

At the entrance, we both bowed down, touching our foreheads to the ground in reverence.

Since the temple stood at a high altitude, I could feel the winds turning sharper and stronger. They were cold and carried a scent unlike anything else—a natural, earthy fragrance tinged with the chill of water flowing through the mountains. The stone floor beneath our bare feet felt moist and cold. Everything around us was breathtakingly beautiful.

Bright sunlight poured down over me, and I had never felt so close to the sun before. The golden rays bathed Hukum’s face, making it glow with a quiet divinity. I couldn’t help but stare at him in silent awe.

He smiled at me, and together we stepped inside the temple.

The melodious voice of the priest chanting prayers echoed through the old stone walls, and as we walked further in, a

strange, moving sensation rose within me. My eyes closed instinctively. I felt as though I were floating, carried by the vibration of the prayer, immersed in its energy.

Never had I felt so deeply connected to God. It was all so overwhelming... and so beautiful.

My heart, which had been in turmoil ever since I could remember, was strangely and unexpectedly at peace.

Hukum rang the temple bell, and I pulled my veil a little lower over my head.

Ranaji, Jiji, and Devarsa were with us as well, and together, we entered the main prayer hall.

My gaze fell on the priest as he offered prayers to the statue of the deity. I lowered my eyes and stood quietly beside him.

Ranaji and Jiji walked ahead and joined their hands in prayer. I couldn't hear the priest's words, but their smiles and the devotion in their posture were enough to tell me how meaningful this moment was. They bent down respectfully and touched the priest's feet. He blessed them and said something I couldn't catch.

Then the priest extended the plate of offerings to Ranaji. I saw him pick up a pinch of vermilion and apply it to the partition of Jiji's hair. She smiled, wiping a lone tear from her cheek, and my heart ached slightly. They were beautiful together.

She then bent to touch Ranaji's feet, who stopped her midway and kissed her forehead.

Oh, so he also kisses Jiji.

That meant... every couple did that. Strange.

They looked at us as they walked out. "We're waiting for you outside," Ranaji said, and I kept my gaze low as they left.

We were alone with the priest.

"Come," he said.

We walked forward. I joined my hands and bent down with Hukum to touch the feet of the deity. Standing again, I

closed my eyes and whispered silently,

“Hey Ishwar, aapka koti-koti aabhaar. Ab yadi humein jeewan mein kisiki aawashyakta hai to wo keval dheriya ki. Bhale hi koi bhi dukh ho, duvidha ho, humein maatra itna saahas pradaan kijiye ki hum kisi bhi paristhiti ka saamna datkar kar sakein, tatha itni sadbuddhi dijiye ki hum usse seekh paayein. Aapka bahut-bahut dhanyawad bhagwaan ki aapne Hukum ko humaare jeewan mein laaya. Krupaya karke ab humaare is rog ko theek kar dijiye. Hum hukum ke samaksh yun nirbal nahi hona chaahate.” (O, Dear God, my deepest gratitude to You. If there is anything I now need in life, it is only patience. No matter what sorrow or dilemma arises, please grant me just enough courage that I may face any situation with strength, and enough wisdom that I may learn from it. My heartfelt thanks to you, O Lord, for bringing Hukum into my life. I humbly pray to You, please heal this illness of mine. I do not wish to appear so weak before Hukum.)

I opened my eyes and looked at the priest. We both bent to touch his feet, and he said, ***“Aapki jodi swayam Ishwar ne banaayi hai. Aapke prem, sammaan aur ras hai isme. Santaanvati Bhavah.”*** (The Divine Himself has ordained this sacred union of yours. It is adorned with boundless love, reverence, and sacred harmony. May you be blessed with a child.)

I gulped, containing my smile. *The priest has said it, so it is real that soon I'll have a child. Maybe all my sickness will go away then.*

The priest offered the plate of offerings to Hukum, who took a pinch of vermilion and filled the partition of my hair. A little of it fell on my nose, and he gently rubbed it off with his finger.

I bent to touch his feet, but he held my shoulder. Still, I bent enough to take his blessings. The moment he touched

and kissed my feet blurred my vision, and I couldn't help but smile.

"Me too," Devar-sa's voice broke the silence, and I looked at Hukum, who smiled.

"Yes, come here."

Devar-sa entered with folded hands, offered his prayers, and touched the priest's feet.

"Ayushman bhava. Yadi kabhi aapka mann na ho to bhi use Ishwar ki ichchhaa samajhkar sweekaar kar lena." (May God bless you with a long life. Even if something happens against your wishes, accept it as God's will.)

I narrowed my eyes slightly, not quite understanding. But Devar-sa didn't ask either; he just nodded with a soft smile.

After the prayers, he bent to touch both Hukum's and my feet. I felt a little awkward, as he was older than I, but Hukum signalled for me to respond.

"God bless you, Devar-sa," I said.

"May you get all the happiness you deserve, Agastya," Hukum added.

We stepped out of the temple and found Ranaji and Jiji waiting for us.

Walking to them, Hukum and I bent low to touch their feet.

"God bless you both," Ranaji said.

"Saubhagyavati Bhava," (May you always be a fortunate married woman.) Jiji added, kissing my forehead lovingly.

Hukum and Ranaji hugged each other. Devar-sa stepped forward to touch their feet, and Ranaji suddenly pulled his ear.

"Ab aaya oont pahaad ke neeche," (Now you have finally bowed down.)

"Bhai-sa!!!" he yelped, and we all laughed.

"God bless you, our naughty Devar-sa," Jiji said as Ranaji pulled him into a tight hug.

We all laughed together, as the moment was filled with joy and warmth. I didn't know what was happening to me, but my heart felt full. Not even a week had passed, and I felt a sense of belonging with these affectionate people, as if I would stay forever.

It reminded me of the family I once had... who never even gave me a quarter of the love I was receiving from my new family.

When I looked at Hukum, smiling at me, something inside me shifted, and I couldn't stop myself from walking over and wrapping my arm around his torso.

This man had changed my life.

My eyes closed, and I felt his arm wrap around me.

"Hey," he whispered.

Suddenly, Jiji asked, "What happened, Aishwarya?"

I immediately pulled back, realising where we were. A wave of timidity washed over me, and I shook my head softly.

Ranaji smiled and said, "Come, let's walk around a bit and return before it gets dark."

Jiji nodded and walked to him, smiling at me.

"Are you okay?" Hukum asked gently, and I nodded. "Come," he said, pulling me into another hug. I closed my eyes, feeling on the verge of tears.

"Is something bothering you?" I shook my head. The tears collected anyway as I clenched my fists around his kurta. My heart was racing, and my breathing turned heavier. I didn't know what was happening.

The memories of my father and sister flooded my mind... and he hugged me tighter.

When I felt him caging me tightly, my attention slowly drifted to his heartbeat as I rested my ear against his chest.

I inhaled and exhaled deeply, trying to pull myself back from old memories into the warmth of this new reality. Slowly, I broke the hug.

He cupped my cheek and made me look up at him. I swallowed nervously, and he gently pecked my cheek.

"You only look good when you are... sick," he said.

Something twisted in my stomach. What did he mean by that? How could he say such a thing?

He smiled and held my hand. "Come, or they'll get too far," he said, and I nodded quietly.

We began walking out of the temple along a narrow, muddy path. The surrounding grass grew nearly to our height, and it was a little frightening to walk through it. When I glanced down over the edge of the mountain, I was terrified.

As we trod carefully, he had clasped my hand. It wasn't the same path we had taken earlier.

"Is this a different way, Hukum?" I asked, and he looked at me.

"So, we are talking now," he said with a light smile. I furrowed my brow in confusion. "Yes," he answered anyway.

I nodded and continued walking silently beside him.

We passed through the tall grass, and I finally spotted Ranaji, Jiji, and Devar-sa waiting ahead.

"There they are!" Devar-sa's voice echoed faintly over the sound of water nearby.

As we walked closer, my eyes caught sight of a stunning waterfall. A broad stream rushed beside us and plunged into the valley below. We were standing at the top of the waterfall.

"Let's go, Bhai-sa!" Devar-sa said with excitement.

Ranaji looked at him. "No, Agastya. With Nandani and Aishwarya here, we can't dive. It's too deep."

Devar-sa made a disappointed face, but before he could argue, Jiji chimed in. "I want to dive. I trust you."

Ranaji looked at her, alarmed. "Are you mad?"

She chuckled, lifting her skirt slightly, and shook her head. "No."

My heart began racing wildly as I saw her wade into the rushing water with Devar-sa, aiming for the middle.

Ranaji and Hukum looked at each other. I didn't know what passed between them in that glance. But Ranaji smiled and walked right after her.

I watched Devar-sa step to the very edge, where the water thundered downwards. I couldn't see where it ended.

My heart pounded faster, and fear gripped me. "Hukum, you should stop them," I said.

He looked at me seriously. "Yes, we should stop them together."

I nodded. Lifting my lehenga slightly, I stepped forward. "Jiji!" I called out.

The water was freezing, sharp winds blew my dupatta off my head, threatening to carry it away, but I gripped it and carefully made my way in.

Jiji and Ranaji were splashing water at each other, laughing and playing. Suddenly, Devar-sa laughed and shouted, "Okay, Bhai-sa! See you soon!"

And before I could process anything, he jumped.

He jumped off the cliff.

My heart jumped with him. And when I looked around, everyone was laughing.

His scream of excitement faded into the roaring water and whistling wind.

Ranaji looked at Jiji, and just as I opened my mouth to call her, he pulled her close into a tight embrace. They stared at each other, and in a split moment, he leaned in to kiss her and jumped.

"OH MY GOD!!!"

Jiji screamed. I had never been more terrified.

With wobbly legs, I stepped closer to the edge and looked down. There was only water, with no visible end.

My heart was racing, breath unsteady. "Huk—"

Before I could finish, I felt two muscular arms wrap tightly around me and pull me in.

Suddenly, I was in the air.

"OH MY GOD!"

I screamed at the top of my lungs, squeezing my eyes shut. The wind slammed into my chest. My stomach twisted violently. For several terrifying moments, I felt like I was dead.

The sky swirled above me. The cliff edge zoomed away as we plummeted. And then, a huge splash, and we hit the water.

It swallowed us whole. All the sounds vanished. The cold pierced straight into my chest.

We sank deeper and deeper until I felt like I could no longer breathe. Until I truly thought, *'This was it.'*

My breathing escalated, and I could feel myself drowning deeper. My body felt lighter, almost weightless. There was brightness around me at first, but it slowly turned darker, as if the water was swallowing me whole, stripping me of all control.

What a humble reminder of our true existence. With all our power and intellect, we might conquer anything, but when nature strikes, we're nothing more than a speck of dust.

I couldn't breathe. My legs kicked aimlessly, trying to find the surface, but nothing met them. My arms flailed in the water, desperate to find Hukum. But I couldn't reach him.

Hukum.

When I tried to call his name, my throat filled with water. For what felt like forever, I was lost in the depths. The fear of dying coursed through every nerve in my body. I had never been so afraid.

My mind went blank, turning completely black.

The freezing water touched every inch of me, even violating the parts of me I considered most private. It didn't ask permission.

My hands kept moving, searching for him. My eyes squeezed shut, and I tried to stretch my arm upwards,

hoping to feel the surface, but it felt impossibly far.

I was lost. Frightened. Terrified to the core. I couldn't see anything. It was too cold. And Hukum... he was nowhere near.

Suddenly, two firm hands wrapped around my waist steadily, and then a chest pressed against mine.

He tightened his hold on me in a firm grip. I felt him move his hand through the water, and within a few moments, we began rising to the surface.

The moment my nose broke free, I gasped, inhaling a sharp, desperate breath.

My heart pounded rapidly, and my breath became shallow and strained. I felt as though I might faint at any moment.

Without thinking, I threw my arms around his shoulders. The water still entered my mouth, and I blinked rapidly, trying to clear my vision.

I kept gasping for air, clinging to him tightly as I felt him move us toward the riverbank.

The water continued to splash up my nose, and I instinctively pulled myself up a little more, wrapping myself around him. My cheek touched his. The cold air made my lips quiver.

"It's cold," I wheezed, gasping for air.

Feeling his large palm on the small of my back, I couldn't help but close my eyes and lean my face into his chest.

A moment later, he gently broke the embrace and guided me back against a large, smoothly curved rock in the river's corner, where the water was much shallower.

I blinked several times, trying to gather my scattered thoughts.

He stood before me, panting heavily. Water trickled down his face, his neck, and his soaked white kurta clung to his body, revealing the firmness of his chest beneath.

There was a slight smile on his face, and I quickly lowered my gaze.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Ranaji and Jiji on the other side of the river.

I couldn't hear them, but they were laughing. Jiji had her arms wrapped around his shoulders, and Ranaji leaned in and kissed her on the lips.

They looked tiny from this distance, but it was all clear.

Suddenly, Ranaji placed his hand on her chest, and a violent shiver ran through me.

What is he doing? Why is he touching her there?

I frowned, and a wave of fear, like the feeling of insects, crept across my skin.

Why isn't Jiji stopping him? Why isn't she saying anything?

Suddenly, I felt his fingers touch my chin. He tilted my face toward him and shifted closer, blocking my view.

I blinked nervously and dropped my gaze.

"Don't look there," he said softly.

His words made my insides churn. I felt small, confused, and nervous. I didn't know exactly what I was feeling.

I closed my eyes, trying to calm my heart, which was battering like a trapped bird inside my chest.

I felt his fingers gently touch my cheek. My own fingers were trembling, both from the cold and from his nearness.

I opened my eyes and saw him tuck a loose strand of my wet hair behind my ear.

My gaze dropped to his chest; his drenched clothes clinging to his skin, highlighting every detail.

I swallowed hard and muttered, "I saw Ranaji touching Jiji... at the wrong place." I couldn't even lift my eyes to meet his.

He stepped in closer, and my forehead rested against his chest. "They love each other, Aishwarya." I heard him whisper in my ear and felt the soft touch of his lips right below.

My lashes fluttered shut, and my hand instinctively moved to my stomach. Something flipped wildly inside me.

So, if they love each other... that means... he can touch her chest.

The question echoed in my head, but the closeness between us silenced the words in my throat.

His finger gently traced the edge of my ear, making me blink, dazed. It was as though he was pulling me closer just with that touch.

The tip of his finger brushed the curve of my ear, and a sharp shiver raced down my spine.

"Hukum," I breathed.

My hand moved from my stomach to his chest almost unconsciously.

The water, the cold, the slow ripples brushing my skin, were all working against me. Each breeze sent new chills through me, and without realising it, I kept leaning in, closer and closer to him.

My cheeks had flushed with heat.

He leaned close and murmured in my ear, "Now, you have touched my chest. Is it wrong?"

His question caught me off guard, and I blinked with unease, trying to make sense of it.

I looked at my palm resting on his chest. I could feel his warmth against my skin, and without thinking, I moved my hand slightly... wanting to feel him more.

His chest was hard and tight, unlike mine, which felt soft and small. I shook my head slightly. It didn't feel wrong. Just... different.

I had never touched anyone's chest before, except the little children of my sisters when they visited, and that too, while playing with them, not like this.

"So... you will also touch my...?" The words came out hesitantly, with great difficulty, from my quivering lips.

I lifted my gaze to look at him, and he gave me a slight, knowing smile, which sent my heart pounding violently in my chest.

My eyes blinked nervously as I saw his gaze slowly drop to my lips.

I inhaled deeply when he moved his hand from the stone beside me to my waist. My chest puffed up while my body instinctively shrank inward.

My heart was thumping wildly as I found myself unable to break eye contact with him. My brows knitted slightly. That strange feeling had returned.

But this time, it was deeper. Different.

The roar of the waterfall echoed all around us. I lowered my gaze as he traced his finger gently over my waist chain.

I tried to push myself back against the stone, attempting to create some distance, but suddenly, he hooked his finger into my chain and pulled me closer.

"Hukum..." My voice trembled as my forehead brushed his chin.

"My name is Ranvijay, Aishwarya," he whispered against my skin.

"I know, Hukum," I replied, my voice faltering.

"Look at me," he said.

I closed my eyes and gulped, feeling his fingers still hooked into my waist chain. I felt his knuckles lightly touch my skin.

I inhaled deeply and lifted my gaze to meet his.

It was incredibly difficult. I could feel my nipples perking under my blouse from the cold water, making me even more aware of my body.

The water reached my midriff, and the chill only heightened the awareness of how close we were.

I looked into his soft yet intense eyes. His pupils flickered as he stared into mine, and his lashes, wet with droplets, framed his deep gaze. His cheeks had flushed red from the cold, and his skin glowed with a sheen of water.

My gaze fell to his lips, which were darker than usual, a shade of pink tinged with a hint of red. They were full and beautiful, unlike mine.

Water still trickled down his chin, and the strands of his hair that clung to his forehead nearly fell into his eyes.

I didn't know what was happening to me, but I wanted to touch his face.

His words from before echoed in my mind. *"I'm yours, Aishwarya."*

And as I stood so close, I couldn't help but feel something shifting inside me.

I bit the inside of my lip nervously. Slowly, I looked back into his eyes. He was still watching me patiently.

We can touch the ones we love.

My fingers trembled as I tried to move them from his chest to his cheek. I was scared he might not like it. But we were so close. He was all I could see.

Cautiously, I touched his cheek. It was cold... yet soft. Not soft like a woman's, but soft like something beautiful.

My eyes met his again, and my heart thudded violently, threatening to burst from my chest.

I remembered what he had asked me to do before. So, I slid my fingers, exploring his face.

The sensations were no longer sharp, but a tightness was blooming in my lower abdomen.

My thumb grazed his lower lip, and I couldn't help but pause to feel it.

It was so soft. So warm. Beyond beautiful.

And it was... mine to touch.

The thought sent a shiver through me.

But suddenly, I felt his teeth against my thumb, causing me to snap out of my thoughts.

He bit me.

My stomach twisted with the strange feeling it left behind.

And then... he gave a smile that made my heart pound even harder. I felt the heat, the wetness pooling inside me again.

"Shall we go?" he asked.

I blinked, returning to reality, and quickly pulled my hand back. "Ji." I nodded.

What was I doing?

He unhooked his finger from my waist chain, and I saw him smiling. "I hope you remember," he reminded gently.

I lowered my gaze timidly.

He held my hand and helped me step out of the water.

I closed my eyes for a moment, trying to calm myself down. It was terrifying... and yet it felt good. Exciting.

I walked out of the river and looked around. There was no one nearby. The sky was slowly growing darker.

The rest of the walk passed in silence, and unlike before, it didn't feel so long. We finally made our way back to our tents.

I figured that Jiji and the others had already returned. We had clearly taken longer than they had.

I went directly into my tent, and Moni followed behind me.

"Are you okay, Bai-sa?" she asked.

I nodded. "I'm feeling terribly cold."

"Can you help me change quickly? Hukum is drenched too and waiting outside. I don't want him to fall sick," She nodded and started helping me.

But suddenly, I heard a deep voice drift in.

"Privacy."

I looked up and saw him entering, then turned to Moni, who simply nodded and lowered her gaze in respect before silently walking out, leaving me alone with him.

I could feel my pulse quickening.

Seeing him walk in with slow steps, I instinctively tried to place my dupatta over my head, but before I could say, hear, or even process anything, he grabbed the hem of his kurta and pulled it off in one swift motion.

I immediately lowered my gaze, struggling not to look at him.

"It wouldn't look good if people saw me standing outside your tent," he said.

I gulped nervously and looked at him.

The tent was dim, lit only by a small oil lamp near the bed. Its flickering light cast golden shadows across his bare skin, making his body glow in the shifting light.

He walked toward the trunk in the corner and took out a fresh set of clothes.

“Do you want me to take out your clothes too?” he asked.

I shook my head quickly. “No,” I stated, but my voice came out rather slow and shaky, giving away the confidence I was pretending to have.

My heart pounded as I walked toward the other side of the tent and knelt beside the trunk. I began searching for my clothes distractedly, moving my fingers senselessly across maroon, white, cotton, anything.

But I couldn’t focus. My hands were trembling.

As soon as I felt him sit beside me, my breath caught in my throat.

He was very close. His half-naked body... it was making me feel strange again, like I was going to faint. My knees were growing weak, and I couldn’t even find a single piece of my clothes.

“Aishwarya,” he said softly.

His voice drifted through the air and down my spine, raising goosebumps on my skin.

I tried to calm my shaky breath. “Ji?” I replied.

My hands were still rummaging through the trunk.

And then he asked in the same quiet tone, “Don’t you think this is my trunk?”

A wave of shame hit me like a crashing tide.

I froze.

Of course, it was. It had only his clothes.

Stupid!

“Yes, I’m sorry,” I blurted and quickly stood up, backing away from him.

He smiled at me, and I immediately looked toward the other trunk near my bed.

No, I had to not look at him. No matter what.

We were alone. He was shirtless. And my heart was thudding in my chest. My stomach twisted. My body shivered from the cold, and my cheeks burned with a feverish heat.

What was happening to me?

Why was I behaving so?

I turned to open my trunk, but in my haste, I pulled too hard.

The cover snapped shut with a loud bang, trapping my fingers inside, and I let out a scream.

A burning pain surged through my body. My fingers throbbed painfully, and I gasped, holding my hand as blood flowed.

Tears gathered instantly in my eyes. I closed them, feeling the ache crawl through my nerves.

"What happened?" I heard him ask.

I pressed my uninjured hand against the bleeding fingers, trying to stop the flow. The red drops were already staining the carpet.

"My fingers," I choked out. Tears slipped down my cheeks, blurring my vision.

"Show me," he said, and gently took my hand in his.

My lips quivered with each soft cry that escaped me as he leaned in, blowing cool air over the cut.

"It's okay. I'll dress it," he said calmly.

I watched him tear a strip from a clean cotton cloth and return to me.

My fingers trembled. The pain was unbearable, and I hated it... I hated the cuts, the bruises, the stinging ache.

"It's okay, Aishwarya," he said again, softly.

I looked up at him with tear-filled eyes. His face was serious, and his brows were furrowed in quiet focus as he examined the wound.

I flinched the moment he touched the cut and pulled my hand back. More tears spilt down my face.

"It's alright. You can bear this pain," he said.

I shook my head. "No, I cannot."

He wrapped the cloth around my fingers gently, but every touch felt like fire. My whole arm was trembling.

"You can. This is just a little pain," he murmured. "Life has so much more in store. How will you bear that?"

His words froze me.

I opened my eyes to look at him. My brows creased together. I tried to understand what he meant.

"What?" I asked softly.

But he didn't answer. He just stared at me for a long moment before lifting my hand to his lips.

He placed a gentle kiss on my wrapped fingers and whispered, "Nothing."

My breath hitched when I felt his hand move to my cheek, wiping away the tears gently.

I shivered at his touch; it startled me, yet it also calmed me.

I opened my eyes slowly to look at him.

"Tell me which pair you want. I'll take it out for you," he said, walking to my trunk.

He sat down in front of it and opened the lid.

I watched him quietly, then said, "The white one."

It was night. I wanted something light. The white one was made of cotton and was the softest.

"Okay," he said and took out the white pair for me. He placed it neatly on the bed and added, "Do you want me to help you change?"

The moment the words left his mouth, a sharp shiver ran down my spine.

"No!" I replied quickly, too quickly, then corrected myself, trying to sound polite. "I mean, no... I can change myself."

I stared at him blankly. He looked so incredibly attractive in my eyes, and I didn't know why. Or maybe I did.

"Alright," he said, and I watched him as he pulled open the curtains around the bed. "You can change on this side,"

he said gently, "and I'll change on the other."

I looked at the curtained partition that divided the bed between us and gave a small nod.

"Okay," I replied softly. It sounded comforting. Almost respectful.

We both walked to our respective sides. He disappeared behind the curtain after picking up his clothes.

The thought that we were in the same tent, changing at the same time, made something stir in my body, something I didn't understand. It scared me. Excited me. And I was utterly confused.

I swallowed nervously and reached behind me to untie the strings of my blouse, fumbling with my fingers. My bangles chimed with each subtle movement, echoing softly in the quiet tent.

I slowly pushed the blouse off my shoulders, shivering as the cold air touched my skin. My braid, still wet, clung to my back as I pulled it aside and reached for the fresh blouse.

As I adjusted the fabric over my chest, I felt it cling lightly against my breasts. My nipples were already hardened from the cold, but there was something else... something deeper.

And as I looked down at myself, like an uninvited memory, I thought of that moment when Ranaji had touched Jiji.

I had asked Hukum, and he'd said I could touch him if I loved him.

So... if he ever loved me, would he also touch me like that?

The thought alone sent a shiver of terror down my spine. My breath hitched as goosebumps covered my arms. My cheeks flushed warm, and an unfamiliar heaviness stirred deep in my body.

Why are my nipples hardening even more? Why am I feeling this strange heat between my thighs?

I lowered my gaze to my chest, to my breasts. Were they even worth touching? Would he ever...?

But what would he feel if he did? Would he like it? Or would he feel disgusted?

No... There was nothing beautiful about my body, not like a flower. Flowers are touched because they are beautiful. I was not.

My brow knitted together. The thoughts felt cruel, but they wouldn't stop. And almost unknowingly, my hand lifted. I touched my breast.

Strange.

I didn't feel what I expected, but something did happen inside me. It was quiet and subtle, but it felt... but real.

I touched it again, a little longer this time. My palm brushed over my nipple, and I felt... something. A tingling. A reaction I couldn't describe.

I inhaled deeply and pressed my hand more firmly, this time over the blouse.

A sharp sensation shot through my body. My lips parted as I exhaled softly.

What was happening to me?

My brows furrowed. I quickly pulled my hand away, blinking hard, when suddenly, his voice came from the other side.

"Aishwarya,"

I jumped, being pulled harshly out of my spiralling thoughts.

Turning toward his voice, I managed to respond, "Ji?"

"Do you want me to help you?"

Frozen, I stood silent. I looked down at myself... then at my bandaged finger.

Slowly, I turned toward the curtain. I needed help, but I felt too nervous to ask for it. I wanted to call Moni, but he'd said he didn't want to wait outside.

I had no other choice. "Ji," I said quietly.

I placed my arms over my chest to cover myself. A few moments later, I saw him stepping out from the other side.

He was fully dressed in black attire. My heart began pounding again.

“Can you please tie these?” I asked in a low voice, turning away from him to face the opposite direction.

I felt him come closer.

Then... his fingers touched the ends of the strings on my blouse.

I lowered my gaze, trying to breathe evenly while he tied the knot. He was so close his warm breath brushed across my shoulder and nape against the cold air. It made me tremble.

I kept my eyes low, tracing the red bangles around my wrist nervously.

“Done,” he said gently. I turned a little to face him, and my heart thudded against my chest. It was the second time I had stood in front of him without my dupatta. It made me feel so exposed, so strange, so timid.

His gaze met mine, then slowly dropped to my waist. “Let me help,” he said.

My heartbeat thundered, and I instantly tried to protest. “Huku—”

“Shhh...” he hushed me softly.

And I stopped.

I watched him reach out and pick up the lehenga from the bed. Then, without looking away, he stepped in front of me.

I was shivering, not from the cold, but from his intense gaze. It had me pinned in my place. Not even the water had made me feel this chilled.

He stepped even closer, and I blinked nervously. My stomach kept flipping again and again, knots forming one on top of another.

Feeling so overwhelmed, I lowered my gaze. My eyebrows drew together, and in that moment, I wished I could vanish.

Slowly, I felt him lifting the lehenga over my head and gently lowering it down my body.

I raised my arms carefully, not to let my fingers graze anything, not even by mistake.

He placed the skirt around my waist with such measured ease. I lifted my gaze hesitantly and looked into his eyes.

The fresh lehenga had covered most of my wet skirt, but I barely registered that. All I could focus on was him... coming closer. Very closer.

And the way he stared deeply into my eyes, I could barely breathe.

My fingers fisted the fabric of my wet skirt.

"Hold it for me." I heard him say,

I blinked again, nervously. My heart was pounding so wildly that it was almost painful. I looked down, trying to understand what he meant. Then, with trembling fingers, I reached out and held the dry lehenga in place with my free hand.

And in the next moment, my breath caught in my throat.

I felt his hand move from the waistband of the new lehenga... to the strings of the wet one I was still wearing.



6. Ranvijay

As soon as I asked her to hold the lehenga, her eyes reflected timidity and nervousness as they met mine, and just beneath it, gleamed a faint flicker of curiosity. Even excitement, I would say.

She was still unsure, but something in her gaze told me she was no longer afraid of me, not like she had been on the first day.

She looked into my eyes now, not away from me.

Her lashes were perfectly thick and beautiful, casting shadows over her dark eyes. The water still dripping from the ends of her long hair framed her delicate face. The tiny droplets dancing along her cheeks and temples made her look so angelic. So enchanting.

I felt something warm, something content, rise in me. She was learning to look at me without fear. She was letting me in, little by little. She was... opening.

And I wanted to know her, truly know her.

She wasn't just a shy girl. She was someone who had never been given a safe space to speak, to feel, or to be understood.

Despite having sisters, she never spoke of them. Only her father. And even that... barely. It made sense to me, though.

I knew what kind of man her father was. I could bet my life that he never treated her with the love and softness she deserved.

She was beginning to turn curious slowly and was growing more comfortable around me.

The way she shared her thoughts about what she'd seen by the river made something inside me stir with quiet pride.

She began talking and... learning.

She was deeply sweet, unintentionally sweet. And every day, my interest in her only grew stronger.

As my hand moved closer to the strings of her wet skirt, her lashes fluttered rapidly.

I stopped because I didn't want to scare her.

She was far too sensitive, too untouched by the world to understand certain things yet. And I didn't want to hurt her or scare her.

I didn't want to teach her or mould her. I just wanted to win her heart, for her to discover herself. Fall in love with her true self.

But part of me was still afraid. Afraid that maybe... she carried some pain I couldn't see and didn't know. Because this wasn't just shyness, it was something considerably more serious.

The way she observed everything around her, longing to discover more about them, trying to comprehend things, said one thing about her. She was curious, but hesitant to ask.

Her silence didn't feel natural; it felt forced.

The thought that maybe her questions had never been answered, that over time, she had simply stopped asking and accepted the way people treated her as the only way life could be, pained my heart.

It broke something inside me.

She lifted her gaze again, and I made sure not to look away. I didn't want her to feel ashamed. I didn't want her to feel like she had to look down just because I was a man.

As I slowly pulled the strings of her skirt, I could feel her heart pounding in the air between us. Her cheeks flushed a deep red. She radiated a warmth so comforting, and the way she glowed made my heart flutter.

I smiled softly at her innocence. She was so beautiful. So mine.

And knowing that I would be the first she ever experienced anything with, filled me with something like

pride... and something like awe.

The way she'd asked about my seeds that day lingered in my thoughts.

Had she seen the jar in the almirah? Or... was she truly talking about those seeds?

It couldn't be. She didn't even understand what a sensual touch meant. How could she possibly know what that was?

"Hukum," she breathed softly, pulling me out of my thoughts.

I blinked, but my eyes stayed locked with hers.

Her wet skirt slipped down her waist, and she quickly pulled the dry one into place.

I stepped back slightly and said, "Turn around."

She hesitated, blinking at me questioningly. "Ji?" she whispered.

I nodded. ***"Haan, ji."***

She took a breath, gulping nervously, then asked, "Why?"

I smiled, touching her shoulder, and turned her carefully. "Because your hair is wet and still braided. It needs to dry. I'll help you open it."

I reached down and ran my fingers along her long braid that ended just below her hips.

"But Hukum... I can do it," she said in a low voice.

My hand lingered on her braid. "Shhh..." I hushed her softly, pulling the pin out and beginning to detangle it. "You're my wife, Aishwarya," I said gently. "Husband and wife help each other. In everything."

She touched her head nervously and asked after a pause, "In... everything?"

I smiled and nodded. "Yes. Everything. You can imagine wildly."

She turned to look at me as I was still carefully undoing the braid.

She looked deep into my eyes, swallowed hard, and asked in a breathless voice, "So... a husband can also help his wife

in changing clothes... and... and see her?"

Her voice turned very low by the end of the sentence, and I furrowed my brows slightly before answering, "Depends."

She immediately asked, "On what?" Her voice was so soft.

"On you," I replied.

"How?" she asked again, creasing her brows together.

I took a deep breath and reached for her braid near the nape of her neck. Stepping closer, my fingers whisked her skin as I started untying the knots.

"If you want me to see you," I said gently, "then I will see you. Will you want me to?" I moved behind her to comb out her wet hair gently, running my fingers through it.

She shook her head. "No."

A wide smile spread on my face, and I couldn't help but say, "Don't worry. Fingers are the best eyes."

"Huh?" she spun around, fidgeting with her hair.

"You have such beautiful hair, Aishwarya," I murmured.

She looked at me and smiled softly, lowering her gaze. "You too, Hukum." I let out a small laugh. She looked up at me again, eyes wide with concern. "Did I say something wrong?"

I shook my head slightly. "No."

"Bai-sa," suddenly, the voice of an attendant broke the moment.

"Come in," I said, turning toward the door.

She entered carrying a plate of food. I walked over to take it from her hands and pulled the curtains aside.

"Come, sit. You haven't eaten anything today." I said, placing the plate on the bed.

Aishwarya walked over slowly and sat beside me, leaning her body lightly against mine. The plate rested between us.

"Did you get scared in the water?" I asked.

She looked at me and nodded. "Of course, Hukum. It was very deep. I've never done anything like that before," she said in a quiet voice.

I smiled and glanced at her wounded hand. She was staring at it blankly. "It's okay, I'll feed you," I said, already reaching for the plate.

She blinked, staring at me, still a little stunned. I tore a bite of food for her and held it out.

"You know, when we were young, we used to dive and play in the rivers. We didn't have bathing rooms like the ones in these palaces..." I brought the bite to her lips, and she took it carefully, but my fingers still felt the warmth and softness of her mouth. "...So, we'd wander around and bathe in the running rivers. We three brothers used to dive for kilometres. Race through the water. We'd jumped from the waterfall dozens of times."

I took another bite for myself and ate it. She let out a small laugh.

"That's so amazing. That was my first time doing something like that. I got scared," she said as I fed her again.

Her left hand brushed the wet strands of hair away from her face.

"Did you enjoy it though?" I asked.

She smiled. "Ji."

I held out another bite, and she accepted it. She seemed quite hungry.

"So," I asked, "do you miss your sisters?"

She inhaled deeply, as if I had caught her off guard. Her eyes shifted, and she looked at me with a confused expression.

"A little," she answered softly, almost sadly.

"Oh... they must love you a lot. I know you're your father's youngest child," I said and fed her again.

But her face dimmed slightly. Her expression shifted. "They all love me," she said slowly, "but... You see, a person like me doesn't deserve it."

I narrowed my eyes and gritted my teeth slightly. "What do you mean?" I asked, keeping my tone low.

She took a deep breath. "Hukum... I'm a very unfortunate person. My mother passed away while giving birth to me. I bring misfortune wherever I go. That's why my sisters don't talk to me much anymore." She smiled faintly, the kind that carried more pain than joy.

"Though they loved me immensely. They liked the food I cooked... they liked how I cleaned their chambers... They liked everything I used to do." Her words came out slowly, and each one felt heavy on my heart.

I didn't know why, but in that moment, I wanted to kill her family. But I chose to smile and said, "But you brought immense fortune to me,"

She immediately lifted her gaze and furrowed her brows. "How?"

I smiled and fed her another bite.

"Jis diwas aapka humaare jeewan mein aagman hua, usi din do rajyoan ke madhya ek mahatvapooran shaanti-sandhi sthaapit hui. Aap mein humein humaari annapoorna, lakshmi aur parvati mili... aur humein vishwaas hai ki aapme durga va saraswati swaroop bhi lupt hai. Bas unke prakat hone ki prateeksha hai humein," (The day you entered my life, a significant peace treaty was established between two kingdoms. In you, I found my Annapurna, Lakshmi, and Parvati... and I believe that the forms of Durga and Saraswati, too, live within you, still hidden. I await their revelation.)

She stared blankly for a moment, and then her face lit up with a sudden, wild smile. "You're joking," she said in a soft voice, but I could tell my words made her happy.

I shook my head. "No, I'm not."

"I'm full, Hukum," she said, placing her hand over her stomach.

I shook my head lightly, smirking. "No way. One more roti, or you'll have to do what I asked you to do earlier."

Her eyes widened instantly in confusion, shock, and timidity. I calmly tore another bite and held it out to her.

She silently took it, and I continued to feed her, one bite after the other.

Her face eventually gave her away. I could tell she was overstuffed.

“Alright, now you should sleep,” I said, watching her try to sit upright and smile through it.

She smiled faintly and lay back on the bed. I picked up the plate and walked out of the tent to hand it to the attendants.

When I came back in, I saw her still lying there, staring at her clothes.

She must’ve been exhausted after all the walking.

I walked over to the side of her bed and leaned in to blow out one of the extra burning lamps.

Just as I was about to, my gaze fell on her face.

Her skin glowed under the golden light, so radiantly. She looked angelic in the white dress, her arms adorned with red bangles that covered her forearms completely. Her long hair lay open around her like a halo.

Suddenly, she took a deep breath and opened her eyes, meeting mine.

She blinked slowly, and I asked, “Feeling cold, Aishwarya?”

Gulping sleepily, she gave a slight nod. “Ji.”

I smiled when I saw her shift a little toward me, even in her half-sleep. I sat beside her.

“Come here,” I whispered, lying down next to her.

Gently, I pulled her closer and held her wounded hand in mine, careful not to hurt her. She unconsciously placed her head on my upper arm and buried her face in my chest.

Her body was warm—too warm.

I reached to pull the comforter over her, and with my other hand, I slid her hair off her flushed cheek.

In a sleepy whisper, she murmured, “Hukum...”



7. Aishwarya

My heart swelled, a lump formed in my throat; I didn't know why, but suddenly I was on the verge of tears.

My body was cold, and with my eyes shut, images from my childhood danced behind my lids.

I took a deep breath and moved my face slightly away from the warmth of his chest to look at him.

He shifted his fingers from my hand to the strands of my hair that had fallen across my face and carefully tucked them behind my ear.

I blinked, feeling a quiet comfort settle inside me.

Honestly, I had never felt anything like that before. Whatever this was, it was evoking feelings I couldn't explain, but they were pleasant ones. And the way he believed I was fortunate for him... that thought alone soothed me in ways nothing else had.

Even so, deep down, I couldn't believe it.

Every time I had been around people, my presence had only brought misfortune. So how was it possible that I was a blessing for him?

Suddenly, he shifted and pulled me even closer, gently placing my face against his chest. My forehead rested under his jaw.

"Do you want to say something?" he asked.

I looked up to find his soft eyes watching me patiently as he gently brushed my hair away from my cheek again.

I'd spent my whole life seeing only anger, frustration, and disappointment in the eyes of those around me. Until him, I hadn't even known that kindness like this could exist.

I took a deep breath and lowered my gaze to his black kurta.

"Hukum... do you like me?" I asked in a whisper.

My heart pounded in fear, already preparing for him to say no.

“Yes,” he answered immediately.

“Why?” I blinked nervously, looking into his eyes. “You’re such a handsome and intelligent man. You could have had any woman. Someone beautiful, educated, with a fair complexion... someone who looks like a real princess and is more suitable for you.” I spoke slowly.

I saw him click his tongue and roll his eyes, turning his head slightly away.

His silence made a sharp ache rise in my chest, but then he spoke again. “Yes, you’re right. But now I’m married to you. What do you suggest?” he asked, but I could feel the tension in the air.

Nervously, I moved off his chest and sat up a little, resting on one hand. My thoughts were racing, painting awful possibilities in my mind. He didn’t deserve someone like me. He was brilliant and capable. Anyone could see that.

I furrowed my brow slightly and looked at my hand, which I had placed on his midriff. His fingers were resting on my bangle-filled wrist, waiting for an answer.

“Another marriage,” I suggested quietly, cautiously.

He inhaled deeply and blinked, withdrawing his hand from mine. Then he rolled his eyes and looked back at me.

And in that moment, I saw his jaw tighten, teeth clenched behind sealed lips. He slowly sat up, lifted my hand off his chest, and said in a low voice, **“Aaj to ye keh diya, Aishwarya, aaj ke baad kabhi na kehna.”** (You’ve said it today, Aishwarya. But don’t ever say it again.)

He moved the comforter off himself.

“Hukum,” my voice trembled as I called out. But he stepped down from the bed, causing my heart to skip a beat.

“Hukum...” I tried again, even softer. But he didn’t say a word and simply walked out of the tent, leaving me behind.

Tears welled in my eyes knowing I had hurt him.

I didn't know what had just happened. Why did he leave me like that?

I kept staring at the entrance of the tent, and soon the tears began rolling down my cheeks.

Maybe he just went to use the bathroom... I told myself as I gulped and lay back down.

But my eyes didn't leave the entrance. I stared at it, hoping he'd return, until everything slowly blurred, and I dozed off to sleep.



"Bai-sa,"

I opened my swollen eyes at Moni's voice. The first thing I did was glance at the spot beside me. It was empty, untouched since the previous night.

Pain surged in my chest.

"Where is Hukum?" I asked, looking up at her.

She furrowed her brow slightly as she started folding the clothes and packing things. "I don't know, Bai-sa."

I looked away, carefully stepping down from the bed.

Outside, the morning had just begun. The tent was half-packed already, and attendants were moving around in haste.

"Are we leaving?" I asked.

She nodded. "Ji, Bai-sa. Ranaji said, We must reach the palace before sunset."

I took a deep breath, steadying myself.

I dressed quickly, but part of me was missing him. My mind couldn't stop wondering, where was he?

I hurt him. I shouldn't have said that.

He had told me clearly that his eyes were only for me.

Why did I always do these stupid things? That's why my sisters and my father never liked me. Because clearly, I always hurt people.

My heart felt unbearably heavy.

"Aishwarya,"

Suddenly, Jiji's voice pulled me from my thoughts, and I quickly pulled the dupatta over my head.

I looked at her, smiling and glowing as always, but my eyes immediately noticed a dark red bruise on her neck.

"What happened to your neck, Jiji?"

She giggled lightly, clearly amused. "Ranaji happened."

I blinked, confused, but smiled anyway. What did she mean?

"Anyway, it's time to leave. We should sit in the palanquin now," she added.

I nodded. "Ji, Jiji."

My eyes wandered around, still searching for Hukum. But he was nowhere in sight when Jiji asked, "Looking for Devarsa?"

I was startled by her question, but nodded. "Ji."

She furrowed her brow slightly in confusion. "Did something happen?"

I swallowed a hard lump down my throat. My eyes dropped to the dry dust beneath our feet as we walked toward the palanquin.

"I angered him," I admitted softly.

She gave a small, knowing smile. "Oh." Pain swelled again in my chest when she added, "That's why he left last night," she said. "He told me there was some urgent work."

I inhaled sharply as tears pooled in my eyes. But I didn't want to cry in front of her.

"Don't worry, he'll be okay," she said, still smiling.

"But how, Jiji?" The ache in my chest grew tighter.

She chuckled. "Then just grab him and kiss him right on the lips."

I stared at her, stunned.

A kiss?

He had asked me for one, too. She was telling me the same?

Why?

Could that really make him feel better? But how could I do that? What would he think if I kissed him?

Yes, he had kissed me before... and I hadn't hated it. However, doing it myself felt completely different.

"Come, sit in," Jiji said, pulling me from my thoughts.

I nodded nervously. "Ji... ji, Jiji..." As I settled into the palanquin, she smiled at me. "But Jiji... how? What if he gets even angrier at me?"

She gave me an amused look, then leaned slightly closer.

The palanquin lifted, swaying with the rocky path beneath us.

"He won't. Just take the chance when you meet him. And if he tries to act difficult, grab him, push him onto the bed, climb over him, and press your lips to his."

My heart skipped several beats just at the sound of that, and my cheeks burned.

"But... Jiji, he's angry. If I do that, won't he get even more upset? I'm sure he won't like it..."

She rolled her eyes, then reached for my hand and squeezed it.

"Aishwarya, he's your husband. He kissed you in front of everyone. Even Ranaji was shocked. He claimed you without saying a single word in front of the entire world. That's how deeply he loves you. Now that he's angry, you need to show him your love."

I bit my lower lip, pondering her words.

She tilted her head and asked, "Wait. Do you love him?"

I looked at her, and something inside me stormed. A sudden wave crashed in my chest.

My head nodded immediately. "Yes!"

Who wouldn't love a man like him?

He was handsome, intelligent, educated, and so patient. He said the sweetest, most beautiful things to me...

"But Jiji—"

"Shut up and go ahead," she cut me off, and I lowered my gaze, blushing furiously.

My heart kept racing just at the thought of kissing him, especially when he was upset.

We didn't talk about it again for the rest of the journey. Instead, we spoke about the empire, its workings, and what awaited us at the palace.

Eventually, Moni came to help me down from the palanquin, and I did as told.

Jiji and I walked together toward the palace gates and bent forward to touch the ground out of respect.

This was our home. The meaning of who we were. And the fruit of our husbands' hard work.

"Alright," Jiji said, turning to me with a wicked smile. "Now go find your husband. And make it a little longer, hmm? So long that he ends up tossing you onto the bed beneath him." She winked at the end, and I stared at her, completely lost. "And I should go grab mine," she added with a laugh, walking away.

I just smiled blankly and walked up the palace stairs to my chamber.

The hallways were warmly lit with rows of glowing lamps, guiding my path. I kept looking around, searching for him. But he wasn't there.

My chest dropped a little as I stepped into the bedroom, alone and disheartened.

I immediately caught sight of him sitting on the couch, eyes lowered to the scrolls and papers scattered before him, his hands stained with ink.

He didn't even lift his gaze to look at me.

I paused for a moment, then decided it would be better to refresh first.

I walked to the bathing chamber, took a quick bath, and changed into a fresh pair of white clothes.

Inhaling deeply, I looked around, trying to find something to talk to him about. Something that would help me start.

Then my eyes landed on the sheets of paper I had been practising on the other day.

Yes, my classes.

I picked up the same papers, held them close, and approached him slowly. He was sitting on the floor, bent slightly forward, his eyes fixed on the low writing table before him. The light from the nearby lamp cast shadows over his face, highlighting the tension in his jaw.

I sat down beside him and took a breath. "Hukum," I called in a soft voice.

"Hmm," he responded with a hum, without looking up.

His hand moved steadily across the paper, making precise, graceful strokes as he wrote. I watched him in silence for a moment.

The quiet indifference in his demeanour made something tighten in my chest.

I shifted closer.

"Hukum... I'm sorry," I whispered, hoping he would say something.

However, he didn't even lift his eyes to look at me, and I blinked, feeling my nerves stretch tightly under the silence.

My heartbeat was racing wildly in my chest. I tried again, slower this time, because of the weight I was feeling inside me. "Hukum..."

"Hmm?" he hummed again, still scanning the document in front of him.

I swallowed hard. My nerves were spiking, my palms turned cold and clammy.

Just a kiss. Only a kiss would make things better again.

But I couldn't even lift my eyes to meet his.

I found myself studying the strokes he was writing. My gaze followed his hand unconsciously, trying to make sense of the curves and letters. I closed my eyes for a moment, then inched a little closer to him.

My arm brushed against his, and he suddenly looked up into my eyes.

"What are you doing, Aishwarya?" His voice was soft, but direct.

I stared at him blankly, unable to answer.

"Huh?" His voice came again, just a hum, and I quickly pulled away.

"Nothing, Hukum. Nothing." A strong wave of fear rushed through me. I averted my eyes toward the bed, thinking maybe I should just walk away and sleep.

But I couldn't. Not while he was still angry. I didn't want him to stay angry. I wanted to make it right.

I tried to meet his gaze again.

He sighed and placed the quill into the inkpot. His jaw visibly tightened, hinting at his growing annoyance, and he turned his eyes towards me.

I was flabbergasted. And out of anxiety, I dropped my gaze to the floor.

After a brief pause, he picked up the pen again and went back to the paper.

"Hukum..." I whispered again.

My heart was thudding so wildly, I had to shut my eyes for a moment. My fingers were trembling, and my cheeks were flushed with unbearable warmth.

"Hmm?" He didn't look up.

I slowly lifted my gaze to him. His eyes were sharply focused on the letters, his lips were still, pressed together, darker pink in the flickering lamplight. A breeze floated into the room and shifted the strands of hair falling over his forehead.

I hated that he was looking at the paper and not at me.

As I shifted closer, my arm touched his again. I leaned in more.

What's the worst that could happen?

He would send me away? Fine. But I didn't want him to be angry. I couldn't bear the silence between us, not after the gentle, heartfelt things he had said to me.

I moved closer. My arm nudged the table on one side, and the other rested against his.

He inhaled deeply and finally looked at me. His eyes searched mine.

Blinking once, he set the pen down and asked, "What now? You clearly don't want us together, do you?"

I stared into his eyes, stunned. Of course I did. I shook my head slightly, trying to make him see it.

My voice came out heavy with regret as I whispered, "I'm so sorry, Hukum,"

He looked away. "It's okay. You should rest now," he said, but his words didn't feel okay. Not at all.

My heartbeat became wild again. I could feel it rising, pounding through me as my mind whirled in a chaotic madness.

All I had to do was take my lips to his and touch them. It wouldn't take long. It wouldn't need strength.

Just go closer... Touch his lips with mine. Simple. Ready.

No, wait.

I closed my eyes, feeling the heat rise in my skin.

Just a kiss. Jiji said it would fix everything.

"Aishwarya," his voice suddenly fell so low, it jolted through me.

I lifted my lashes and looked at him, only to find him looking right into my eyes.

"Ji," I breathed.

Everything else faded away. There was only him.

"What do you want to do?" he asked.

I gulped nervously. My heartbeat was racing wildly, and my cheeks were burning with heat.

"Kiss," I muttered, barely audible.

He arched his brow, questioning. "For real?" His voice was soft, yet sceptical.

I lowered my gaze to his lips. *But, wait!*

Jiji said something else, too—something about pushing him onto the bed.

I glanced around and realised we weren't in bed, which meant it wouldn't work.

I dashed away from him, furrowing my brows.
How was I supposed to ask him to go to bed?

Idea!

A small smile crept onto my face, and I immediately stood up.

He narrowed his eyes at me, then turned back to his scrolls.

I took a deep breath and walked toward the bed. I glanced at him once, but he was busy again.

I looked back at the edge of the bed. I raised my foot and purposefully slammed it against the bed with as much force as I could muster.

A sharp pain shot up through my leg. I screamed as the pain caught me off guard.

“Aishwarya!” His voice called out instantly, alarmed.

I clutched my foot, and tears pooled in my eyes.

God, it hurts. I hadn’t thought it would hurt so much.

He rushed to my side and gripped my shoulders. “Hey, hey. Calm down. Sit here.”

No, I can’t sit! I had to push him onto the bed. But my foot was really hurting.

But the kiss?!

I took a deep breath, looked at him, and pushed him with all the strength I could gather.

He lost his balance and fell back onto the bed, startled. His eyes widened at me. “What??”

He sat halfway up, but I climbed onto the bed quickly, pressing my knees onto the mattress as I moved closer.

His puzzled gaze followed me.

I was so scared. *What if he slapped me for this?*

“What are you doing?” he asked, keeping his tone low, trying to sit up again.

But I placed my hand on his chest and gently pushed him back down. Jiji’s words echoed in my mind.

Just a kiss, Aishwarya. Just a kiss.

My fingers rested against his chest, and I leaned in closer.

His eyes were on mine, and the way he looked at me made me feel restless, afraid, and nervously breathless all at once.

His brows furrowed, and my heart pounded so hard, I thought he might hear it.

I bit my lower lip and stared at his mouth.

Just lean in... Touch your lips to his. Simple.

As I slowly leaned forward, my stomach coiled.

However, I leaned in low and softly touched my lips to his, just for a moment, and then immediately pulled back.

I did it. It was... easy. Yes. Easy!

But he bit his lower lip and clicked his tongue.

My heart dropped at the sight of seriousness.

Had I done something wrong?

I looked down, feeling a wave of fear wash over me. "... Are you still angry with me?" I asked uncertainly.

He nodded slightly.

My heart broke in two. I furrowed my brow.

What now? Should I kiss him again?

"Oh..." I mumbled blankly. I looked up into his eyes. Half my weight rested on him, my feet nearly touched his ankles, and my arms were keeping me propped. My dupatta began slipping off my shoulder as my braid shifted to one side.

I looked at his lips again.

Gathering courage, I leaned in and kissed him once more. This time, longer. Softer.

"Now?" I asked nervously, feeling goosebumps tingle across my cheeks.

He shook his head. "No."

My stomach flipped, and my heart was in chaos.

Again?

I shut my eyes and kissed him a third time, a little longer than before.

"Now?" I asked, my voice trembling slightly.

He shook his head again.

My heart felt like it was about to burst, and everything inside me churned. It was as if all my strength was slipping away.

I closed my eyes, and for the fourth time, I moved closer, parting my lips slightly as our mouths met, and then I drew back a bit.

“Hukum... now?” I whispered, searching his eyes.

He looked at me intensely and shook his head once more, lightly, but firmly.

My lashes fluttered, and something strange stirred inside me. Unknowingly, my lips moved closer to his. I parted them to leave a gentle peck, but I let it linger just a little longer than before.

My heart pounded rapidly as a flood of sensations washed over me. When he slowly wrapped his hand around my waist, I felt a sudden wetness bloom deep within me. I rolled my thumb in a nervous circle, trying to regain control.

I couldn't fall sick before making it up to him.

Slowly, I pulled back and looked into his eyes. He held my gaze, then shook his head lightly again.

Closing my eyes, I leaned forward, angling my face slightly until my nose brushed his cheek. Our breath caught at the exact moment our lips met. I parted mine and gently took his between them, sucking softly for a moment.

My breath stilled, and my whole body trembled. A dizzy weakness spread through me, as though I might faint.

I pulled away and looked into his eyes. “Now?” I asked, biting my lip to stop it from quivering.

He glanced at my lips, then shook his head slowly. “No.”

My heart thudded loudly in my ears. Leaning in again, I parted my lips and kissed him, this time with more force. I tilted my head in such a way that my nose brushed against his cheek again as I took his lower lip between mine, deepening the kiss, sucking more firmly.

I felt his face lift slightly with the pull. I broke away just enough to look into his eyes again.

“Now?”

His breathing had turned heavier, too. He stared into my eyes for a second before murmuring, “Better.”

My eyes were drawn back to his wet, flushed lips. Sliding my fingers from his chest to his cheek, I leaned in closer, guiding him nearer.

I closed my eyes and pressed my lips to his once more. They felt soft and warm.

With my lips parted, I pulled his lower lip gently between mine and sucked it slowly, unhurriedly.

Our breaths clashed in the narrow space between us. I pulled back slightly, then tilted my face and kissed him again, deeper this time. My lips moved with his, tasting him.

A jolt of sensation surged through me. My core throbbed, making me press my thighs together.

I kept kissing him again and again. Once... twice... Careful not to let my teeth graze him, I sucked on his lips gently.

Suddenly, his hand tightened around my waist, and he shifted, turning me beneath him.

“Huku—”

My breath caught, and my stomach somersaulted.

He cupped my jaw, hovering over me. I felt the heat of his words as he whispered, “Fuck your innocence!”



8. Ranvijay

I didn't intend to, but the words escaped my mouth as I cradled her face between my hands, resting my thumb along one cheek, caressing it.

Her breathing was uneven, and her heartbeat thundered between us, but even that couldn't mirror the intensity, the need coursing through me.

My eyes fluttered shut as I pressed my lips to hers. She shivered in my hold, yet I couldn't stop myself from deepening the kiss, slowly but fiercely. My lashes closed again as I let my lips move against hers with an aching need.

A breathy, trembling moan slipped from her lips, inviting me, heightening my arousal.

She shivered in my arms, and I pulled back for a moment to look at her. Her lips trembled, and her lashes fluttered uncontrollably. Fear, confusion, and something more flickered in her eyes.

Guilt twisted within me. I immediately moved her over me, cupping her cheek to keep her close, trying to ground her, trying to ground myself.

She looked into my eyes, then hesitantly down at my lips. "Now, Hukum?" Her voice was soft, melodic, and trembling.

I nodded lightly. "Good,"

She gave a small, nervous smile.

I gently tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "Do you want me to kiss you more?" I asked in a low voice.

She gave a shy nod after a pause that felt like eternity.

Calmly as I turned her under me, her eyes searched mine in timidity, filled with a desire, I believe, she couldn't yet name.

I placed my elbow beside her chest, caging her perfectly.

When I got closer, she clenched my kurta tightly. Her parted lips and lowered lashes told me everything. I closed my eyes and kissed her again.

She flinched just slightly as our noses brushed. As I cupped her cheek and pulled her gently into the kiss, her hot breath fanned against my face.

With parted lips, I softly sucked on hers. Her fingers clamped tightly at the first touch, and when I pulled back, she gulped nervously. Her eyes flicked between mine and my lips, blinking fast.

She looked so delicate. Her lips were so soft and glistening, parted slightly for me.

I shifted my hand from behind her head to her cheek and used the other to loosen her fingers from my kurta, gently pinning her hand above her head. Her chest heaved rapidly as I entwined our fingers.

She breathed in deeply. "Hukum?"

I pressed my lips to hers again, cupping her jaw, holding her close as she was trembling under me.

Parting my lips, I began sucking slowly, but she was stiff and seemed uncertain. I wanted her to open for me, and so I nipped her lower lip, pulling it apart.

Her eyes shut tight as I sucked her lips intensely, more firmly, until she gave in. Her body shivered, and she parted her lips, moaning softly, almost melting beneath me.

"Ah... Hukum..." She was breathless, panting heavily.

I pulled back, biting my lower lip as I saw hers, wet, swollen, and pink.

I wanted to devour her.

My heartbeat thundered in my chest. My hold on her jaw and hand tightened unconsciously. Our breaths intertwined as I pressed my forehead to hers and kissed her again.

She wriggled her legs; I could feel her thighs pressing together. Her anklet bells chimed softly, sending another thrill through me. The sound was maddening.

She opened her mouth to breathe again, and I immediately kissed her lips once more, pulling her lower lip between mine. She tried to pull her hand free, and so I loosened my grip without even thinking.

My eyes stayed closed, and I let myself sink into her softness, her warmth, her lips. My breath grew heavy as my lips clung to her lower lip passionately. For a moment, my mind blurred, forgetting she didn't know what I might do next.

But then, she tried to pull back.

Her breath was ragged. Suddenly, she turned her face away, and my lips brushed her cheek instead. Her breathing was loud and uneven.

Panting heavily, I opened my eyes, and my brows drew in concern.

She was trembling. Her eyes shimmered. *Tears?*

Damn it.

I immediately let go of her jaw. She slipped out from beneath me, sitting upright, clutching her chest. I lay back on the pillow, covering my face with a hand.

What did I just do? I shouldn't have...

I lowered my palm and looked at her. She sat quietly, yet her chest rose and fell in ragged breaths. Her eyes were cast low as if trying to hold herself together.

I closed my eyes and took a long, deep breath.

What the hell was she doing to me? And the cruel part? She didn't even understand it. She didn't even realise it. Why was she so innocent?

Maybe that's why I felt so aroused, so filthy, because she was that innocent.

Gods, save me.

A few moments of silence passed before I dared to call her. "Aishwarya,"

But as she was adjusting her dupatta, her delicate fingers trembled terribly, and her shoulders stiffened. "Ji," she murmured.

I clenched my fist, feeling a strange pressure in my chest.

Why the hell was I falling for that innocent, melodious voice so fast? It aroused me in no time.

She looked at me, and I saw it all—the timidity, the confusion, the nervousness on her face, with a flicker of fear.

Maybe I shouldn't have kissed her like that. I bit my lower lip and reached for her. "Come here."

She lay back slowly and hesitantly, placing her hand between us as if to mark a boundary. I leaned in, unable to stop myself, and gently kissed her forehead.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. You're just so beautiful... I forgot to control myself." My voice was gentle, laced with remorse.

She shivered slightly. Her big, expressive eyes met mine with uncertainty. "Control?" She whispered, frowning.

A smile tugged at my lips as I watched her nibble her lower lip.

"Yes," I replied simply.

She gulped and, after a pause, asked in that same quiet, curious tone, "What is there... beyond control?"

Ah... She's curious. Interesting.

I clicked my tongue and took a slow breath. "Depends," I said.

"On what?" she instantly countered.

"The situation," I replied.

She exhaled heavily. "You're angry at me again," giving me a situation.

I looked at her and smiled faintly. Her lips were parted, brows narrowed into a tense line.

I swallowed hard and leaned closer to her ear. "I'll kiss every inch of you when you come to make up to me," I whispered.

She shivered violently at my words. I leaned back slightly to look into her eyes. We were close, too close. Her gaze flickered from my eyes to my lips.

“Every inch?”

I brushed her lips with mine, barely touching. “Every fucking inch of you, Aishwarya,” I mumbled.

Her lips trembled beneath mine. She flicked her gaze away and then back again. “Hukum...” Her voice was faint, frightened. Her fingers cupped my wrist uncertainly.

Her breath was speeding up erratically. “Calm down, Aishwarya. I won’t do anything... not until you ask me to.”

Her eyes met mine again, and I could see the confusion in her expression.

“Hukum,” an attendant’s sharp voice cut through the air.

Aishwarya flinched and pushed me off in panic. I lost my balance and fell off the bed with a loud thud.

“Ahh, Hukum!” she gasped, scrambling to the edge of the bed.

“Hukum!” Even the attendant at the door rushed over, setting down the plate.

My gaze lifted, and I saw Aishwarya with her hand covering her mouth. Her eyes opened wider, and she was on the verge of tears.

“I’m sorry, Hukum. I’m so sorry, please!” Tears welled in her eyes.

I sighed. *Why the hell does she have to be so insane and adorable at the same time?*

“I’m okay,” I muttered, watching her grasp my hand.

“I’m so sorry.”

Her face was pale with worry. I couldn’t help but groan and clutched my lower back dramatically.

“Argh... my back, Aishwarya.”

She gasped in panic. “What? What happened to your back? Are you hurt? I’m so sorry, please!”

I stood shakily, putting on a show. The attendant jumped in. “I’ll bring hot massage oil.”

She hurried off, and I turned to Aishwarya, who had crouched by me, helping lift my leg onto the bed.

I grunted in pain again, loudly.

She froze, wide-eyed. "You shouldn't have done it," I grumbled.

"I'm sorry, Hukum. Please forgive me," she whispered, visibly shaken.

The attendant returned with a bowl of oil. "Shall I call the physician?" She asked, placing it on the bed.

"No need," I said firmly. "Aishwarya will do it."

She turned to me in shock. "But Bai-sa's hand is wounded," the attendant reminded.

"No, no, it's just a minor cut," Aishwarya interjected quickly, already unwrapping her bandage.

"You can leave," I told the attendant, who bowed and exited.

Aishwarya approached me, her fingers poised and visibly shaking.

"Should I take it off?" I asked, looking at her hands.

Her eyes widened in shock, her mouth agape. "Huh?" she exclaimed in a soft, confused tone,

"Kurta, Aishwarya. My kurta," I immediately corrected myself, keeping a pained expression on my face.

She nodded quickly, stammering, "Ah, yes, kurta... your kurta... naked... I'm sorry." She blabbered senselessly, and I had to hold back my laughter.

God, she is adorable.

I grabbed the ends of my kurta and swiftly pulled it off over my head. Her eyes went wide, and her expression shifted into a nervous panic the moment she saw me half-naked.

I could see her trembling slightly as I extended my hand to offer her the kurta. Her fingers were shivering when she reached out, while her eyes remained fixed, almost frozen, on my chest.

I smiled and asked gently, "Should I lie down on my back?"

She gave a small, hesitant nod. Her gaze flickered quickly between my eyes and my bare torso.



9. Aishwarya

My fingers trembled as I peered at his chest and stomach.

Unlike mine, he didn't have a plain, flat stomach but a muscular one, sculpted into six naturally formed rectangular boxes. My eyes kept involuntarily drawing to the dark mole on his midriff.

As I lifted my gaze for a moment to meet his eyes, he smiled.

"Come on," he muttered, and I nodded.

You can do it, Aishwarya. He is hurt because of your foolishness. You must bear the crop you sowed.

I inhaled deeply and sat down beside him on the edge of the bed. My cheeks burned from our closeness and everything that had just happened. I could still feel how he had pulled my lips into his mouth and made me experience sensations I never even imagined. My stomach had flipped a thousand times when he lay over me, holding me close.

My heart thudded wildly in my chest as I found my gaze drifting again to his torso. His chest was broad, puffy, easily twice the size of mine.

Why the hell am I comparing?

I shut my eyes tightly, trying to calm myself.

"Aishwarya," his voice startled me.

I opened my eyes and looked at him, waiting for my move.

"Ji," I replied.

His lips curved into a smile, and I lowered my gaze nervously. Pouring some oil into my palm, I gently rubbed my hands together, feeling the warmth seep into my skin and relax me slightly.

But then he sat up, and my stomach twisted.

My eyes widened as he leaned closer to my cheek. My lashes fluttered rapidly before falling shut when I felt the warmth of his cheek against mine.

A strong shiver raced down my spine as he pressed his lips near the edge of mine, gently.

"You don't have to be scared all the time," he murmured. "I won't eat you," I drew in a sharp breath and met his gaze nervously. He smiled again and added, "Also, the problem is in my back, not my stomach."

A fresh wave of embarrassment crashed over me, and I immediately looked down.

What the hell is wrong with me? Why do I always behave like this around him?

"Uh, yes. Please turn around," I blurted, and he smiled.

I shut my eyes again to calm my racing heart and saw him lie down on his stomach, pressing his face into the pillow. He rested his hands under his cheek, and for a moment, I felt relieved. At least he wasn't watching me.

But my relief didn't last long.

The moment I looked at his back, my breath caught. He was tall and strong, and his back muscles rippled even when still. His shoulders were wide and defined, his biceps taut with the way he'd folded his arms.

A quiet gasp escaped my lips.

Calm down, Aishwarya! He won't eat you. He told you. Just breathe. Just apply the oil. That's it.

Plastering a courageous smile on my lips, I rubbed my palms together again and focused on his tanned back. I took a steadying breath and slowly, with trembling fingers, touched his lower back.

He exhaled relaxedly.

I noticed his eyes close out of the corner of my eye. Smiling faintly, I gently ran my fingers over the spot where he'd earlier held his back. When he didn't react, I applied a bit more pressure and began massaging in slow, rhythmic strokes, the same techniques I used to use on my sisters.

The sound of my bangles softly chimed in my ears as my hands moved over his skin in steadier motions.

After a while, I realised he had fallen asleep.

A wide smile bloomed across my face. *Finally!*

He wasn't angry anymore.

Getting out of bed quietly, I washed my hands in the bowl of water, and glanced at the untouched food and then looked back at him sleeping soundly.

Should I wake him up? But what if he's already eaten?

My brows furrowed in uncertainty, and just then, my stomach growled.

But I was hungry.

I inhaled deeply and decided not to wake him. I picked up the plate and took it to the couch, where I ate two rotis quickly. I covered the remaining food with a cloth and set the plate back on the table.

After the meal, I walked toward his worktable and looked at the papers, ink stains, and open scrolls scattered all over. A few droplets of ink had even fallen onto the wood.

I smiled. I didn't know why, but everything related to him made me feel something... warm.

Sitting down, I picked up the ink bottle and tightened its cap, placed the quill in its holder, and carefully rolled up the scrolls. One by one, I organised everything on the table, then took a cloth and cleaned it gently. Then, I turned toward the couch and noticed the pillows scattered messily. I arranged them neatly in place.

Time to go to bed.

I let my dupatta slip down from my head and looked around. The candles were still burning, casting a golden light over the chamber. I walked to the lamps and began dousing the extra flames, one by one, until only a soft glow remained.

Then, I walked toward the windows, opened the curtains and tied them at the corners to let the fresh night air flow in.

Finally, my gaze returned to him, sleeping peacefully on his stomach.

I walked up to him and gently opened the comforter, carefully covering him with it.

Suddenly, he inhaled deeply and shifted onto his back. My heart raced, thinking he had woken up, but thankfully, he hadn't. He simply stretched out his arms on the bed like a small child.

A slight smile touched my lips, and I looked at the curtains surrounding the bed. Carefully and slowly, I walked over to untie them, letting them fall around the bed to keep out the mosquitoes and other insects.

I took a deep breath and felt a tightness in my chest. I was tired too. The journey had been long, and sleep was pulling at my body.

Parting the curtains, I sat on the left side of the bed. My gaze wandered to his sleeping face. His hair had fallen over his forehead, and I couldn't help but smile at my beautiful, handsome... husband.

I giggled softly, covering my face with my palms, feeling shy and flustered.

But then, the memory of his words about kissing every inch of my body made my heart skip a beat. I tried to comprehend the feelings it stirred in me, but before I could think further, I was flabbergasted when he suddenly pulled me closer to him with surprising strength.

A sharp gasp escaped my lips as I looked at him. His eyes opened lazily, and in a hoarse, sleepy voice, he murmured, ***"So jaaiye, Aishwarya, ab,"*** (Aishwarya, sleep now.)

I nodded nervously. "Ji," I replied softly and straightened my legs, lying down beside him.

He reached out and held my hand. I turned to face him, but his eyes were already closed again. Closing my eyes, I too tried to fall asleep, though the visuals of everything that had happened between us continued to blur through my mind.

Eventually, I slipped into sleep.



I woke up when I felt satisfied with my rest. Stretching my arms wide, I blinked lazily and inhaled deeply.

That's when I felt his presence behind me, and his arm draped around me. My back was pressed against his bare chest.

Oh my God!

The last traces of sleep vanished from my body as I swiftly turned to look at him. He was still asleep, and his breath was warm against my ear.

My eyelashes fluttered closed again as he unknowingly pulled me closer in his sleep. His arm tightened around my waist, and I bit my lower lip, struggling to stay calm.

A moment later, his grip relaxed, and I could tell he was waking up.

"Aishwarya," he murmured in his deep, sleepy voice, pulling his hand away from me.

I took a quiet breath of relief and peace, turning my head slightly to reply, "Ji."

He looked sleepy. His eyes were slightly red. I watched as he shifted away and ran his fingers through his hair.

"Are you okay?" he asked in a low, gentle tone. He lifted himself slightly, resting on his elbow.

"Ji," I nodded.

He smiled, and I slowly tried to sit up, looking around for my dupatta and, just like before, found it beneath him.

Thankfully, the strings of my blouse weren't trapped under him.

I watched as he stepped down from the bed, and I closed my eyes for a moment to calm my racing heart. The memories from last night were still dancing vividly in my mind.

Then suddenly, I remembered.

"Hukum," I called.

He stopped mid-step and turned to look at me. "Haan?"

His brows were slightly furrowed, and I gathered the courage to ask in a slow voice, "How is your back now?"

He smiled warmly and nodded. "It is perfect now. You've got such magical and beautiful hands."

I blinked, stunned for a second.

Really? He liked it.

A bright smile spread across my face, and I watched him disappear into the bathing chamber. I stepped down from the bed as well and began tying the bed curtains back to the posts neatly.

I didn't know what it was, but something had changed inside me. Something new had taken root in my chest. I couldn't find the words to explain it.

Just then, I heard his voice again. "Aishwarya."

I didn't know what it was, but every time he called my name, something deep within me stirred.

Ah, yes, I had to remind him about the seeds.

I smiled softly to myself. *Now everything will be okay.*

I saw him emerge from the bathroom with water dripping from his face and hair. He patted his skin dry with a towel.

Inhaling deeply, I walked towards him. "Ji."

Let's do it.



10 Ranvijay

I placed the towel down on the couch and watched her fingers nervously playing with her bangles.

“What made you think I was angry?” I asked gently.

I noticed her expression change, something in her face turned afraid, and I tried to smile to make her feel at ease.

She gulped and blinked a few times before whispering, “You left me alone that night.”

I smiled faintly and walked toward the corner almirah to find my hair oil.

“But that doesn’t mean I was angry,” I replied.

She followed me with hesitant steps. When I turned around, she was right behind me.

“But... you were, Hukum,” she mumbled.

That ‘Hukum’ always made me feel the distance between us. Every time she called me that, it was as if miles stretched between us.

Her gaze dropped, and she reached out her hand slightly.

“May I?” she asked.

I smiled at her timid offer. “Are you sure?”

She nodded shyly, and I handed her the bottle of hair oil. Her eyes glanced toward the couch, subtly suggesting I sit. I smiled again and walked over.

As I sat on the floor, leaning against the edge of the couch, I glanced at my table. It was spotless; everything was in place, unlike how I’d left it the previous night. That small change... it was new to me.

“You must never say that again, Aishwarya,” I said quietly.

She sat behind me, adjusting her legs on the couch, and I leaned forward a bit to give her space.

“I’m sorry, Hukum,” she said gently. “I didn’t know you would be this offended.”

I heard her pour oil into her palms and rub them together. Her touch warmed my scalp as she began to massage my head. Her bangles' gentle tinkling sound calmed me with each motion.

"I'm sorry," I said. "But the way we got married... it must've made you think you don't mean anything to me. But it's not like that. If I'm married to you, then I'm only yours. I couldn't belong to anyone else, not even in my worst nightmares."

She didn't respond immediately. Her hands moved gently through my hair, the sensation lulling me into a state of peace. My eyes drifted shut with the quiet that washed over me.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'll never say that again,"

I nodded slowly with a faint smile on my lips. "That's like my newlywed bride, Aishwarya." I heard a light giggle from behind me and asked, "How did you learn to massage so well?"

She was perfect at it, beyond perfect. I had never thought marriage would carry such soft, beautiful comforts. Everything about it was new and strangely welcoming. For someone like me, who had never really looked at women or longed for companionship, this was profoundly moving. Books, knowledge, and my duties had always consumed me. I had never known a home, never even wanted one.

And once she had arrived, everything changed.

My freedom to travel had quietly vanished. Even my mind, once so easily detached, now clung to her voice. Having a wife felt like a confinement. A sweet one, perhaps.

"I used to give massages to my sisters," she said.

I inhaled sharply, feeling a flicker of anger passing through me.

Why did everything have to go back to her sisters?

I was certain that I'd meet them, I'd teach them a lesson and make them realise what they had let go.

"Oh," I said simply.

The sound of her bangles continued to soothe me, threatening to lull me back to sleep.

It was at that moment that I understood why women were important. Because only she could make these walls a home. Only her care, her presence, her warmth could build something real, like a mother, a friend, and a strong companion.

A soft smile rose to my lips as she gently combed my hair with her fingers.

"Hukum," she called in her low voice.

"Haan?" I hummed, still with my eyes closed.

"You have such beautiful hair,"

I chuckled lightly and turned my head to look at her. The smile vanished from her face the moment our eyes met, and she quickly lowered her gaze.

"I mean..." she gulped. "...it's good." I smiled again, and she looked up slowly to meet my eyes.

"Actually, I want to say something," she said nervously.

I moved to stand up. "Yes, tell me."

Running my fingers through my hair to smooth it back, I leaned over the table to look for the scrolls I needed to take to court. I was already running late.

I could sense her hesitation, the trembling nerves in her steps as she walked toward the table. I waited until she returned. She held something in her hand.

A bowl?!

My brow furrowed as I looked at her face. She appeared more nervous than ever; her heartbeat seemed to echo in the silence.

"What is it?" I asked softly.

She slowly extended the bowl toward me.

My eyes dropped to the silver empty bowl, and again I looked back at her. Her expression hadn't changed. She was shy and anxious. But there was something about it that made me want to smile.

And then she whispered, "Seeds."

I blinked, confused for a heartbeat... then it hit me.

My brows rose, and I burst into laughter, turning away from her to hide the wide grin that had taken over my face. I pressed my hand over my mouth not to embarrass her further. It was too sudden, too pure.

I inhaled deeply, trying to compose myself, and looked at her again.

"Seeds? My seeds? Aishwarya..."

She nodded, blinking slowly. "Ji."

I smiled even more and shook my head slightly. "No, I mean... my seeds or my seeds?" I asked again, gesturing with my hand as if to clarify.

She frowned a little, confused. "Your seeds," she replied, tilting her head slightly.

God, she looks adorable.

I chuckled as I looked at the bowl she held. Reaching forward, I took it gently from her and examined the beautiful carvings etched onto the silver.

My lips curled slightly in amusement as a ridiculous thought crossed my mind. What seeds was she even talking about?

Of course, my dirty brain had to offer the most inappropriate visual of me jerking off into the bowl.

Gross!

I shook my head to rid myself of the thought and looked back up at her. She was definitely not talking about that.

"Alright," I said with a smile.

I walked over to the almirah and retrieved the glass jar of seeds I'd grown myself in the little garden behind my chamber. A blend of medicinal and nutritional seeds, carefully chosen and nurtured.

Taking the whole jar, I walked back to her.

She looked at me with slightly furrowed brows. "Is it in this?" she asked.

"Yes, I've grown them myself," I replied.

She smiled. "Oh."

I placed the jar on the table and took out a handful of the mix, pouring a portion into the bowl and handing it to her.

"You must take only this much and make sure you soak them overnight. Have them first thing in the morning," I instructed.

She looked at the seeds carefully, then nodded. "Are these... your seeds?" she asked, still with that slight confusion.

"Yes, these are my seeds. I'm the one who grew them. I own them," I said, smiling. Unless she meant the other kind of seeds I carry. But I was almost certain she didn't.

She raised her eyes to me and smiled sweetly. "Okay. Thank you so much."

I smiled again, watching as she carefully stored the jar in the almirah like something precious.

"Alright, I have a few things to discuss. I'll see you in the afternoon," I told her.

She nodded from across the room. "Ji."

There was a strange glow, a spark on her face after receiving the jar. It left me slightly puzzled, but I chose to ignore it.

I headed out to meet Bhai-sa and Agastya. They were to discuss the reconstruction project for the outer regions of the palace. The contractor had been given a span of sixty sunrises to survey and bring us a detailed budget.

"Bhai-sa," I called as I reached the meeting chamber.

He turned and smiled. "Ranvijay."

I glanced at everyone seated. "Bhai-sa," I greeted again.

Agastya smiled, "We were just waiting for you to begin."

I gave a small nod and an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry."

I took my seat and began unrolling the scrolls. As I did, my gaze caught on a single long black strand of hair lying across the parchment.

Her hair. My heart skipped a beat.

Suddenly, I felt a strange warmth coursing through my chest.

I quickly glanced around to see if anyone noticed. With a swift motion, I rolled the strand inside the scroll and tucked it into the folds of my robe.

“Shall we start?” Bhai-sa asked.

We all nodded. “Ji, Bhai-sa,” I replied.

The discussion began. Since the project was massive and expensive, far more than our in-hand treasury could handle, some donations had come in, the most generous being from Bhabhi-sa.

There had also been an offer from Aishwarya’s father, a proposal I had rejected outright. Despite that, I couldn’t stop thinking about it.

How could he?

I took a deep breath to steady my thoughts and focused on the discussion.

The meeting lasted nearly one and a quarter ***prahar*** (Hour). Once it was done, I returned to my chamber.

I stepped inside, unbuttoning my overcoat, and looked around.

“Aishwarya,” I called out, but got no response.

I stepped into the bathroom, splashed water on my face, and then checked the dressing room. She wasn’t there either.

“Aishwarya,” I called again, walking toward the courtyard.

As I moved closer, a soft, melodious hum floated to my ears. My heart slowed instinctively at the sound. Her voice had a rhythm that calmed my every nerve.

Entering the courtyard, I saw her sitting cross-legged on the carpet, a dupatta in one hand and a needle in the other. A small plate of beads and stones lay beside her, and she was concentrating on stitching them in.

Her humming stopped as soon as she noticed me.

“Hukum,” she said, quickly rising.

I shook my head. “No need.”

I walked closer and sat down in front of her. My gaze drifted to the cloth in her hand. “What is this?” I asked.

She looked up. "Do you want to see?"

I smiled widely. "Yes."

She grinned and held the dupatta up, spreading it to show me her work.

The moment my eyes landed on it, a soft gasp escaped me.

It was... beautiful.



11. Aishwarya

I looked at him as he observed the design that I had embroidered on the dupatta keenly.

Using blue, gold, and green silk threads, I had stitched dancing peacocks across the fabric and had embellished them with delicate beads and stones.

"This is amazing, Aishwarya. I've never seen anything like this," he said, clearly taken aback.

I smiled softly as he reached out to touch the tail of the peacock I had recently completed.

"It's incredible, Aishwarya. I've visited so many markets, but I've never seen such fine work with this level of detail," he added, and I found myself smiling at his appreciation.

My heart fluttered with joy.

"Are you making this for yourself?" he asked.

I shook my head with a small smile. "No. I've made many like this for my sisters. I even designed a few lehengas for them. This one... I'm making it for Jiji. I want to surprise her," I said.

He lifted his gaze from the fabric to look at me. "Really?" he asked in amazement.

"Yes," I replied.

Without hesitation, he shifted closer and sat beside me. "Can you teach me how to do this?" he asked.

I blinked, frowning in surprise. "Hukum, but—?"

He looked at me with a smile that made it impossible to finish my question. "But what, my dear talented Aishwarya?"

I didn't know why, but my gaze dropped to his lips the moment he said that. And with it, the memory of the previous night came flooding back, making my heartbeat pick up speed. I quickly looked away.

“Okay,” I whispered, trying to calm the rush of heat rising in my chest.

I held the needle between my fingers and carefully inserted the golden thread through its eye. “You’ll have to use this needle,” I explained in a hushed voice.

I couldn’t believe that he actually wanted to learn this. I mean, he was so well-read, a consultant in court, and a prince. What need did he have to learn embroidery?

And the way he seemed genuinely interested and sat so close made me nervous.

He took the needle from my hand and moved it to the spot where I had left the design.

“Then?” he asked, and my eyes drifted up to his face. And there, when my eyes fell on the little mole near his ear, a small smile touched my lips.

Suddenly, he turned to look at me, catching me off guard, making my breath hitch.

I blinked quickly and looked down at the cloth again. “Then... you have to do this,” I murmured.

“You’ll have to explain. I’m an amateur,” he said.

I nodded, swallowing down the lump of nerves rising in my throat. “Ji... Ji, Hukum.”

I closed my eyes for a moment, gathering myself, and opened them again, pointing to the part of the peacock’s feather he needed to work on with trembly fingers.

“Push the needle through the fabric... and then pull it out from a point just a centimetre away. That’s how you fill the feather.”

He leaned forward, creasing his brows together, trying to comprehend.

“All right,” he said.

But I could see how he was struggling to even hold the needle correctly between his fingers.

I leaned in and gently reached for his hand. “Not like this, Hukum.” And he stilled.

When he looked at me, I saw his gaze dip to my lips. I inhaled sharply, feeling heat rush through me. My lips parted to steady my breathing, and I lowered my gaze to his hand.

"Then?" he asked again, meeting my eyes.

"Your fingers should be light... yet firm. Don't grip it too tightly. It shouldn't feel rigid; you need to feel the thread and move with it. Like a... like a gentle touch," I explained, trying to keep my voice steady.

I gently adjusted his ink-stained fingers, guiding them into the correct position on the needle. Even a slight touch sent a ripple of warmth through my stomach. His breath brushed softly against my cheek as he was close... too close.

"Okay," he said, focusing on the fabric, lowering the needle, and slowly pushing it through. I watched him pull it out on the other side.

I smiled. "Now... add a bead to the needle, and repeat the process," I said, demonstrating how to insert the bead.

He took his time, and after a few attempts, tied the first bead in place.

My smile widened. "You did it, Hukum."

He looked at me with a proud grin. "Wow. This is amazing, and much harder than studying or writing," he said.

I giggled. "No, it's not."

He shook his head. "You say that because you know it. But for someone like me, who doesn't even understand colours, it's a mystery. I don't know how you even imagined it." I swallowed quietly and found myself staring at his lips as he spoke in a deep tone.

I clenched my fingers into a fist, forcing myself to look up into his eyes and offer a small smile.

"It's simple. About a year ago, a peacock flew onto the terrace of my chamber back home. It was the first time I had seen one so closely. The green, blue, a touch of black and golden colours were... mesmerising. So I thought of stitching a pair of peacocks onto a dupatta. I made the first

for my sisters, and now I want to make one for Jiji too,” I said softly.

His expression filled with admiration as he smiled at my response. “Wow... You take inspiration from nature. That’s incredible.”

I gulped, trying not to let the memory of the previous night consume me. The way his lips had pressed into mine, making me feel sick at that moment, and how he had left me breathless, sucking my lips.

Does he realise what his presence is doing to me?

When I noticed him looking at me, my heart skipped a beat as I met his intense eyes. A storm of sensations swept through me, wavering my composure.

His breath slowed, his eyes dropped to my lips, and I saw him slowly leaning closer.

“Hukum...” I breathed, blinking rapidly as old memories surged through me again. I remembered feeling a tightening sensation in all the wrong places. I was also acutely aware of how my nipples had perked, how feverish my skin had felt, and how my body had responded when he kissed me.

I turned my face slightly away, squeezing my eyes shut, only to feel his breath graze my cheek.

And when his lips touched my ear, a shiver ran down my spine.

My face angled instinctively toward his warmth, surrendering to the sensation of his wet, slow kiss on the sensitive edge of my ear.

His breath was trembling hot, and I felt goosebumps erupt over my neck and jaw.

My eyes fluttered shut when I felt his mouth cup around the shell of my ear, and the wetness of his lips sent sparks down my spine.

I exhaled deeply when I felt the light flick of his warm tongue.

A soft, uncontrolled sound escaped me before I bit down hard on my lower lip, pressing my mouth shut in

embarrassment.

I reached out, placing my palm lightly on his chest, meaning to push him away, when I felt his teeth nibble down lightly, making me hiss.

Startled, I jerked my head away to look at him, with a frown.

What was that?

Why would he bite me like that? Had I done something wrong?

A rush of questions, confusion, and unappeased desire swirled through me. My eyes blinked rapidly, stunned by the wave of emotions his touch had stirred in me. And he just smiled.

I looked down and saw my hand fisted in the fabric of his kurta, and quickly let go. I lowered my gaze, unable to comprehend what had just happened between us.

My fingers brushed over my ear, which still held the wet trace of his mouth. I looked back up at him.

He was watching me, resting on his elbow with his head supported lazily by his hand. "You look beautiful," he said.

A flush of timid warmth swept through me.

I gulped hard, realising the sudden, aching wetness gathering between my thighs. His touch had ignited something I didn't know how to name, and I didn't know how to stop it either.

"So... that was because I'm looking beautiful?" I asked quietly.

He nodded. "Yes."

He let out a deep breath and handed the needle and cloth back to me. "I want you to do something for me, Aishwarya," he said.

I took the needle from his hand with shivery fingers and nodded. "Ji?"

My heart was still thudding inside my chest. I didn't know what he was about to say.

He gently held my wrist and pulled me closer, and my back rested against his torso as he lay back on the carpet.

"We're going through a serious financial crisis right now," he said.

I frowned slightly. "Financial crisis?"

He nodded. "It means we don't have enough money to carry out the regular affairs of our kingdom. And there's a major construction that's yet to begin. That's why we need funds."

"Oh," I whispered, watching his fingers play idly with the gold bangles he had once gifted me. I didn't know why... but I enjoyed being close to him like this.

Even if it left me distracted, even if it made me feel sick and dizzy, it still felt good, as though something new and unknown had opened inside me, something that craved more, even if it was wrong.

"So... I want you to start a business," he said.

I looked up from his fingers to his eyes in astonishment. "A business?" I stuttered.

He nodded. "Yes. You are beyond perfect in this sewing and stitching, Aishwarya. You have such brilliant, unique ideas. They could change the entire game of women's clothing. These designs, these patterns... they're unlike anything else. And being the first to offer them, we'll have an opportunity to earn higher profits."

His voice had turned serious as he added. "Not just in Suryagarh, but across other empires too. It can strengthen trade between kingdoms, bring prosperity to our people, and help us invest in the society's welfare."

My heart skipped at his words.

He wanted me to do that?

I could never have imagined it. Never.

"But... Hukum, how can I?" I asked hesitantly, caught between disbelief and fear.

"You'll have to do it for me," he said, and I noticed the weight in his eyes. A flicker of worry and responsibility

rested on his expression, and my heart ached seeing it.

"Please, Aishwarya," he added, almost in a whisper.

My breath faltered at the emotion in his voice, and I blinked nervously. Before I could answer, a voice interrupted us.

"Bai-sa," came the soft tone of an attendant, and I glanced her way.

"Ji?"

She bowed slightly, and I felt Hukum's fingers idly tracing over mine beneath the fabric as the attendant spoke. "Rani-sa is asking for you."

I turned back to look at him just as a wide smile broke across his face.

"Go," he said with mischief twinkling in his eyes. "Something interesting is waiting for you."

I narrowed my brows at him. "Like what?" I asked curiously.

His eyes twinkled as he said, "Like a meeting of women. You're part of this palace now, and an important one, not just for me, but for us. Bhabhi-sa might want you to know about the workings of the palace. I'm sure you'll enjoy some of it, perhaps more than you expect."

I gave a small nod, though anxiety filled me as I wondered what it might be.

I had never been part of meetings or affairs of the kingdom. It had always scared me. Talking to people, being watched, and being judged for no reason made me feel uncomfortable and small.

"But Hukum... I just want to be here. I don't think I can help Jiji," I tried to explain gently.

He turned to the attendant still standing by.

"You can go," he told her, and I watched as she left, leaving us alone again.

I gulped nervously when he sat up, folding one knee behind me. He placed a hand close to mine on the floor,

almost boxing me in on one side, and looked directly into my eyes.

“What was your name before marriage, Aishwarya?” he asked.

I inhaled sharply as his fingers tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear. His touch was soft, and I shivered when his finger slowly traced just behind my ear.

“Aishwarya,” I whispered, struggling to keep my voice steady.

He lifted his intense gaze from my ear to my eyes. “And now?”

I bit my lip, blinking slowly, as the realisation crept over me.

Aishwarya... Ranvijay Dev Singh.

But I couldn't say it, because a wife wasn't supposed to tell her husband's name.

“Tell me,” he said again, locking his eyes with mine.

I looked away and took a deep breath to gather some courage.

“Say it, Aishwarya,” he whispered again.

When I looked up, his face had turned a shade redder, and his lips were slightly parted, pulling memories from the previous night.

I inhaled again, then looked down and whispered, “Aishwarya...” But the words stuck there, and I couldn't push further.

“Yes, then?” he prompted gently, retracing the outline of my ear with his finger, sending a wave of goosebumps down my neck. “Say your full name, Aishwarya,” he urged in a firmer tone.

“But, Hukum—” I started, but he interrupted me.

“I'll make you kiss me a hundred times if I have to say it for you,”

I gasped softly, not from the threat but from the sheer heat in his tone. I gulped as the fear of him getting angry engulfed me

My heartbeat thudded, and I clenched my hand tightly over the folds of my lehenga.

"Hukum... Aishwarya... Ra... Ran..." I faltered, feeling my chest tightening as his fingers still toyed gently with my ear. I closed my eyes and forced the words out in a trembling whisper, "...Ranv... Ranvijay... Dev... Singh."

My cheeks flamed hotter than ever before.

I shouldn't have said it. It was a sin. I felt a lump in my throat.

"Good," he said.

No, it's not good. I shouldn't have done it.

But before the guilt could fester, his fingers tilted my chin upward, and I met his gaze again.

"You're not just Aishwarya anymore," he said with certainty. "You are now Aishwarya Ranvijay Dev Singh. Understand?"

"Ji," I replied, swallowing hard.

He smiled. "I'm with you always, no matter where, how, or when. You will never be alone. Don't fear making mistakes, Aishwarya. I will never hate you for them. Be a child with me. Learn, stumble, fall a thousand times if you must before you learn to run."

His voice was unwavering as he continued. "I will never judge you. Neither will I ever deprive you of having opinions. I'll never ask you to stop making mistakes, to silence your heart, to quiet your voice, or to stop loving yourself."

"I'll help you correct them," he said without a moment's pause.

"What if I hurt someone... by mistake?"

"You won't. I can bet my life on that," he immediately responded.

"What if I make wrong decisions?"

"There's no such thing as right or wrong. It's all a matter of perspective."

I drew a deep, shaky breath. "What if I can't do it?"

“Does a newborn learn to walk on day one?” he countered without missing a beat.

I was getting restless. “What if people hate me for deciding on their behalf?”

“Then listen to them,” he said again, calmly, still missing what I was really trying to say.

He wasn't getting it.

How could I do all this? It was too much. Deciding for others, managing things... It wasn't me. I could sew, stitch, and do my chores, but this was too big for me to handle.

“But, Hukum...” I tried again.

He came closer. “I'm here for you, Aishwarya. Even if it doesn't work out, it's okay. Things happen. Trust me, I'll never let anyone blame you. You can do it.”

I blinked quickly, feeling my throat tighten.

Then, in a slow, almost tearful voice, I whispered, “But... I just want to be here in your chamber, with you. I don't want to leave.”

He inhaled deeply at my words, then replied in a soft voice, “Okay. Don't go then. Just be here with me.”

I felt his arms wrap around me, pulling me close. He placed a gentle hand on my head, caressing it softly as I pressed my forehead against his chest. Tears rolled down my cheeks as old memories clouded my vision.

The laughter of my sisters and the voices of people sneering kept haunting my mind.

‘What the hell is she even wearing?’

‘Look how terrible she looks!’

‘Oh God, she just fell... hahaha!’

I shut my eyes tightly and felt his hand brush against my ear as he spoke again. “It's okay. That was the old Aishwarya. The one I have in my arms is talented, capable, and beautiful.” His warm voice travelled gently into my soul.

He cupped my cheek and made me look into his eyes. Wiping my tears, he placed a soft kiss on my forehead, and I tried to calm my shaking breath.

“Look at me, Aishwarya,” he said, and I obeyed.

He wiped away the tears still clinging to my cheek. My gaze dropped again when he leaned in and kissed my cheek.

“I spend my whole day at the court,” he said quietly. “And in the evening, there are more responsibilities. There will be days when I won’t be able to give you much of my time. And as much as it hurts me, work will always be a priority. I’m not just a man, but a representative of Suryagarh’s court,”

He looked at me with calm seriousness. “While I’m away fulfilling those duties, I don’t want you to wait or cry for me. I want you to work for yourself... to have a life of your own.”

I shook my head. “No. My prime responsibility is to you. I don’t want to compromise our time for anything else.”

He smiled at me and leaned forward until our foreheads touched. “Why are you so selfless, Aishwarya?” he asked softly.

I closed my eyes, feeling the warmth of his breath on my face. Then, I slowly opened them again, meeting his gaze.

“Theek hai. Aap jaisa chaahengi waisa hi hoga... parantu abhi Bhabhi-sa bula rahi hain, to aapko jana chahiye,” (Okay, I agree to whatever you want... but right now, Bhabhi-sa is calling you. You should go.)

I immediately nodded with a smile. “Yes,” I said, and his lips curled into a small smile.

“But you have to kiss me before you leave,” he said.

My eyes widened. “But... why? Are you angry?” I asked, feeling confused, and he smiled, shaking his head.

“No, my dear Aishwarya.”

“Then?” I blinked, frowning.

He looked serious earlier, so why this sudden request?

He smiled once more. “You should go. I’ll explain it tonight.”

I nodded silently. “Okay.”

Withdrawing his hand, he leaned back a bit, and I looked down shyly.

"I should go now," I said, rising to my feet, but his request kept echoing in my head.

As I stood, I noticed his gaze drop to a plate of stones and beads. He began playing with them, moving his fingers aimlessly as he waited for me to leave.

I turned away and took a few hesitant steps.

But something tugged at me.

It wasn't pain. It wasn't joy either. It was like a needle prick in the heart, as if I were longing for more of him, for more words, for more closeness. I lowered my eyes and kept walking, even though my legs felt weak and my chest felt heavy.

I bit my lower lip and paused just a little away from him. The memory of the previous night pulsed through my body, clouding my thoughts, making me weak at the knees.

Do I want to feel that again? Do I ever want it to stop? What is happening to me?

I glanced back at him with a puzzle of thoughts. He still sat there, absentmindedly playing with the beads, and I took a deep breath to compose myself.

I should go.

I turned again and took another step forward.

But his voice echoed in my head, "*You have to kiss me before you leave.*" His words stirred the warmth in my stomach again, tangling everything inside me.

Hearing a soft sigh behind me, I turned immediately.

He had stood up and lifted his eyes to meet mine.

"What happened, Aishwarya?" he asked gently, picking up the plate and my dupatta from the floor. "I should keep them inside," he added with a quiet smile.

I nodded and finally turned fully away from him, leaving the chamber.

As soon as the orange sunlight of the setting sun touched my face, I inhaled a deep breath.

I ambled toward Jiji's chamber.

"Where is Jiji?" I asked the attendant upon arrival.

She smiled and said, "Please follow me."

I nodded and quietly walked after her. The chamber's architecture was like ours, though larger. She guided me through the hallways until we reached the courtyard. And the moment I looked inside, my brows furrowed.

A sharp gasp escaped my lips at the sight.

"Oh my God..." The words slipped out in a stunned whisper.

A slight shiver ran down my spine as my eyes fell upon two women in minimal clothing, sitting far too close to each other. Not just close, one had her hand placed firmly over the other's breast.

Discomfort rippled through me immediately, and just then, Jiji's voice pulled my attention away.

"Aishwarya,"

"Huh?" The sound escaped my lips in a low breath as I turned toward her, startled. "Jiji," I mumbled quietly. My gaze kept flitting between her and the women, who were kissing each other passionately.

I walked toward her slowly as my knees felt shaky.

She patted the seat beside her on the couch. "Come, sit here," she said.

I nervously adjusted my dupatta and sat down beside her, feeling slightly tense and uncertain.

Does she... want to kiss me too? But why would she?

I glanced back at the two women, and probably Jiji noticed my dilemma. "That's it?" she asked them suddenly.

Those women smiled at her and nodded. "Ji, Ranisa. This concept is still unfamiliar to many women. So, we'd like to take it slow."

She smiled approvingly. "Alright. What's next?"

I blinked, becoming even more perplexed. Looking at her, I asked hesitantly, "What are they doing here, Jiji?"

She turned to me. "They're working on new techniques for lovemaking," her face glowed with her usual grace as she spoke.

My brows pulled together in confusion. I swallowed, unsure if I even wanted to understand. "Lovemaking?"

She nodded. "Yes. It helps women discover what they truly want."

Her words only unsettled me more. "What do you mean?"

Jiji leaned slightly closer. "I mean that experiments lead to desire, Aishwarya. The things we see, the things we touch, hear, smell... they leave impressions on us. Those impressions stir emotions. And when we crave those emotions repeatedly, they turn into desire," she explained calmly, and I listened, trying to make sense of her meaning.

"Take sweets, for instance," she continued. "Someone smells something sweet; that aroma makes them feel happy. And happiness creates a desire to taste it. Once they do, they build an emotion around it. The next time they crave that same sweetness, it's no longer just about taste; it's about reliving that feeling. That's how desire grows."

And just like that, her words hit something inside me.

He kissed me once... and now I crave it.

Yes, that's why I had looked at him that way. That's why I hesitated to leave. I wanted to kiss him again. I wanted the feeling of his lips on mine.

But how... and why?

My brows furrowed, and I turned to her again. "Jiji... but is it good to have desires? I mean... should we?"

She chuckled softly. "Why not, Aishwarya? A harmless desire is one of life's sweetest gifts. It drives you. It strengthens and moulds you."

Her words echoed in my head.

So... my desire wasn't wrong. His desires weren't either.

He kissed me once, and it felt sweet. That kiss created an emotion in him, and he craved it again. That was why he asked for another kiss.

Stupid me. How could I think he wanted to kiss me because he was angry?

"Jiji, I have to go," I said, standing up suddenly.

Her brows raised in surprise. "But you just arrived. I thought we'd have lunch and spend the evening together."

I took a deep breath. "Yes, we will... I mean... of course! I just remembered... I really need to pee. Urgently."

Her lips parted, and she chuckled. "Run."

I laughed awkwardly and rushed out.

My steps carried me quickly through the corridors, past the garden, until I reached our chamber. I stopped before entering and took a calming breath.

Swallowing hard, I tried to ease the dryness in my throat, then stepped forward and climbed the stairs. The guest chamber passed in a blur, then the bedroom.

I parted the curtains, and the soft clinking of the tiny glass beads hanging from their edges echoed faintly in the silent room.

There he stood, by the almirah. He had his back turned, with a book in his hand.

I stepped forward, and the sound of my anklets broke the stillness with a delicate chime.

He turned toward me with a smile etched across his face. "You're back? Already?"

His gaze dropped to the book in his hands as he flipped through the pages as though searching for something specific. I glanced toward the table, noticing the beads, plates, and my dupatta lying next to his scrolls, ink, and paper, each item taking up its own space, yet blending with the other.

"Ji," I muttered softly, stepping closer.

Without looking up, he asked casually, "Forgot something?"

"I..." I tried to speak, taking my steps nearer to him.

He finally looked at me with a gentle smile. "Do you want to say something, Aishwarya?"

I nodded, "Ji, Hukum."

Slowly, I reached forward and took the book from his hand, gently closing it before placing it back inside the

almirah.

He furrowed his brows in confusion, focusing his eyes completely on me.

Lowering my gaze, I lifted my hand to the side of my nose ring to take it off. "You know, Hukum... It's not wrong to have desires."

He nodded without hesitation. "Absolutely right."

He leaned back against the shelves behind him, and when I looked up, his eyes met mine with an unwavering intensity.

"When you touched... my lips with yours that day, I felt something in my body. I think... that was how it began. Desire is born from emotions, isn't it?" My voice trembled, yet I continued pouring out what was weighing on my mind. "And now, I... I desire to kiss you again because it made me feel something, maybe because I felt loved, or even... beautiful. I'm not sure what that emotion was. But it lives in me now, and I want to feel it again. I desire it. Is it your desire too?"

My words shook slightly, but I spoke them anyway. I had to, because I trusted that he wouldn't laugh or scold.

And just like I expected... he smiled. "That is very deep," he said quietly.

A shy smile formed on my lips, and I blinked slowly, trying to steady my nerves for what I wanted to ask next.

"So... Hukum, can I ki—"

"Of course," he interrupted, lowering his eyes to my lips.

My heart pounded heavily as I stepped closer, with knees wobbling. I searched his eyes, trying to read the depths behind them.

As his arms came around me, and his fingers brushed along the curve of my waist and the small of my back, I leaned in, surrendering to his warmth. Our bare feet touched, and our legs gently brushed. I tilted my head back slightly to look at him.

His gaze was calm, but somewhere in that stillness, I could see desire.

“Do you also desire to kiss me?” I asked in a whisper.

He nodded. “I desire you, Aishwarya. You’re the only one I desire.” The depth of his words made my heart beat fast.

My eyes lowered to his lips as he leaned in, but the height difference remained. So, I placed my hands gently on his arms, feeling the soft cotton of his kurta under my palms.

Stepping onto my toes, I tightened my grip to balance myself, lifting one foot into the air. The few inches between us shrank to mere centimetres. My lips parted, struggling to breathe.

His warmth radiated into me, and I could feel his breath grazing my face.

Closing my eyes, I lifted my chin just slightly... to reach him.

There’s nothing wrong with having a desire.

When our lips touched, a delicate shiver ran down my spine. We were trembling as our lips hovered and brushed against each other, yet he wasn’t doing anything.

I struggled to breathe; it took a few rapid beats for me to bear our proximity. Moving forward, I pressed a soft kiss on his lips, just once, before pulling back slightly to look at him.

As he blinked in a daze, I looked at his long lashes, dark eyes, the corners of which were tinged with red. I leaned in again and kissed him longer this time. And he pressed his hand into my back, pulling me closer.

I lost balance slightly as his strength pulled me in, and suddenly there was a sharp clatter behind him; something had fallen from the almirah.

He angled his head sideways, pressing his lips more firmly into mine. His mouth caught mine, pulling my lower lip between his. As the kiss deepened, I gasped, feeling breathless.

Our chests crashed against each other when he inched even closer, making me take a step back instinctively. His hold tightened around my waist. One of his hands moved higher, sliding from my back to the nape of my neck.

He cupped the base of my neck gently but firmly, and my lips parted further as his kiss grew urgent.

I shuddered at the sudden shift when my back hit the bedpost.

“Ah, Hukum,” I gasped, feeling my knees giving in, and an aching wetness pooled low in my belly.

He tugged my waist chain, pulling me toward him until my hips collided against his. His lips sucked mine hungrily, and I could feel the pressure, like he was going to bruise me.

And suddenly, his tongue entered my mouth, causing a violent shiver to ripple through me, and my stomach twisted.

Oh... My God.

His voice came between our breaths. “Ask me to stop, Aishwarya. Right now,” he breathed those words into my mouth, and I swayed, feeling overwhelmed.

My toes hurt from balancing. My chest felt tight. Yet...

“I don’t want to...” I whispered over his lips.

His fingers dug into the side of my neck, and I gasped softly, unable to hold back the sound.

He kissed me even more desperately, exploring the inside of my mouth with his tongue. Another breathless rumble escaped me.

“Just tell me and I’ll stop,” he hissed.

But I shook my head. “No.”

And with that said, he suddenly turned to me and pushed me onto the bed, beneath him.

My back pressed into the soft mattress, and his weight over me drew a soft cry from my lips. My heart thudded wildly in my chest, yet the desire within me refused to calm.

My lips, of their own accord, moved hungrily against his, despite the dizziness rising in my head, despite the sickness stirring in my stomach.

Why am I craving more?

“Ask me to stop, Aishwarya,” he grunted against my lips, pulling my waist firmly against his. Our lips crashed again,

and I was breathless, yet I didn't... I couldn't stop.

His hold tightened around my nape as he slowly pulled away, parting his lips from mine. My chest heaved rapidly as I struggled for air. I opened my eyes and looked at him.

His hair had fallen over his forehead, and his eyes flickered between my lips and my gaze. His lips had turned a darker shade of pink, trembling with the wet glisten.

I glanced down at his mouth and couldn't stop myself from lifting my head, trying to kiss him again.

But he stopped me.

His grip on my nape held me still. We breathed against each other's lips. The warmth of his breath fanned over my face, and I blinked nervously, searching his eyes.

Why did he stop?

"Hukum..." I breathed, leaning in again.

But he brushed his fingers gently over my lips. "No more, Aishwarya," he said.

I swallowed hard and watched as he shifted his weight to the bed and stood.

A sudden ache spread through my chest as I watched him run a hand through his hair, stepping back.

When I sat up slowly, he looked at me, gulping as though trying to form words.

I tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear while he took another step back. I stood too, and the chime of my anklets caught his attention.

He took a series of deep breaths before turning away.

"Don't follow, Aishwarya."

My feet stopped on their own, even though my heart longed to follow.

As I watched him disappear into the inner part of the chamber, I felt... abandoned.

Tears welled in my eyes. *Did I do something wrong?*

He told me to ask him to stop, but I didn't. I should have. But he said he'd be there for me.

Why did he leave me like that?

Tears spilt down my cheeks, and I placed my hand over my lips as I could still feel him, his warmth.

Why did he leave me?

He said those beautiful words... and then left me.

I took a few deep breaths and straightened myself. I decided that I wouldn't ask again and wouldn't go to him.

He's all talk... no bark.

I adjusted my clothes, placing my dupatta neatly over my head, with the thought of meeting Jiji.

I shouldn't have come here in the first place.

First, he asked me to kiss him, and when I did, he walked away.

How could he?

I didn't know exactly what I was feeling, but it was a strange mix of hurt and anger.

Inhaling deeply, I walked out of the chamber and went to Jiji's room.

She welcomed me warmly and took me around, introducing me to the other ladies, who held various positions in the palace. I tried to pay attention, but my mind kept returning to the chamber... to him.

We had our evening snack and later dinner together. Jiji was lovely and kind, filling the silence with sweet stories, especially the one about her and Ranaji. I couldn't believe how he fought everyone just to marry her.

It was beautiful.

"Nandani," Suddenly, Ranaji's voice reached us, and I stood up at once, startled to see him entering the guest chamber.

I adjusted my veil and turned my face away.

"Aishwarya Bai-sa is here too," he said with a smile.

"She has been here since evening," Jiji replied, returning the smile. "We spent a great time together."

I stepped forward to greet him and bent down to touch his feet.

“God bless you,” he said, and I smiled faintly, turning to Jiji again.

“I should go to my chamber now.”

She nodded warmly. “Good night.”

I gave her a soft smile and walked away, heading back to my chamber.

Taking a long breath, I stepped inside the bedroom. I kept my gaze low, walking straight toward the bed. But I could feel his presence in the room, like the air itself was different because he was there.

From the corner of my eye, I caught sight of him watching me.

And when I turned slightly, he didn’t look away.

“Aishwarya,” he said.

Just that one word, in his deep, yet soft voice, swept over me with an unexpected calm. And I couldn’t stop myself from answering.

Looking at him, I retorted, “Ji,”

He was sitting behind the table, dressed in a white kurta, holding his scrolls and a quill. My heart skipped just looking at him like that.

“Come, sit here,” he said, patting the seat beside him.

Gulping, as I walked toward him, the soft chime of my anklets echoed across the room. I sat beside him silently.

His gaze remained on me, and a faint smile curved his lips.

“Was it nice to talk to Bhabhi-sa?”

He asked, and I gave a slight nod. “Ji.” I didn’t want to talk to him.

His smile faded slightly, and I saw his hand slowly reaching toward mine. I instinctively pulled my hand back.

He closed his fingers into a loose fist and looked at me.

“Are you angry with me?” he asked softly.

“No,” I shook my head. “Why would I be angry with you?”

He just stared at me for a few quiet moments, then nodded faintly. “Okay... so what did you and Bhabhi-sa talk

about?"

I took a deep breath, pulling a sheet of paper and a spare quill toward me. "Nothing important," I muttered, then, looking at him, I asked, "What should I learn now?"

He lowered his gaze to the paper and began drawing strokes in the corner.

"This one," he said quietly.

I started copying the strokes. A long silence followed as he worked, and I imitated his lines. I didn't want to speak, not only because I was angry, but because I still didn't feel good about what had happened earlier.

I had thought he felt the same about me... but maybe I was wrong. Perhaps I had misunderstood everything.

I sighed softly, and he glanced up at me.

"Enough for today, Aishwarya. You should sleep now," he said.

I nodded quickly. "Ji."

I placed the quill in the inkpot and stood up. He leaned forward to blow out the candle, and a strange tightness formed in my stomach.

He stood too, but I didn't look at him. Quietly, I walked into the dressing room and changed for the night, then returned to the bedroom.

He was already lying on his side, half-covered.

I moved toward the bed, taking my time, and parted the curtains. My eyes fell on him, watching me.

He looked at me and patted the space beside him.

I swallowed hard and sat down, then lay on my side, facing away from him.

As the silence stretched, I closed my eyes, trying to calm the strange knots inside me.

I wanted to talk to him, but his reaction earlier... it made me doubt everything I had felt.

Suddenly, I felt him shift behind me, and his arms wrapped around my waist. My body stilled for a moment

when his cheek touched mine because of how close we were.

His bare chest felt warm against my back as he inched near, trailing his finger softly along my arm.

"Are you angry with me, Aishwarya?" he asked again, and I shook my head.

"No, Hukum," I answered in a quiet voice.

His touch sent goosebumps over my skin.

"Then... are you upset with me?"

I shook my head again. "No. Why would I be upset with you?"

His lips hovered near my ear, and his voice dropped to a murmur. "Are you sure, Aishwarya?"

I didn't know why, but the way he said my name sent a shiver down my spine.

I tried to nod. "Ji."

He pressed a soft kiss to my ear and whispered, "Let me know how I can make it up to you... whenever your anger fades."

I turned immediately to face him. "I'm not angry, Hukum," I said, locking eyes with him.

He smiled slightly. "Then why aren't you talking to me?"

I frowned. "But I am talking to you," I countered slowly.

"No," he replied. "There's something there. I can feel it. There's something between us. Tell me, Aishwarya... am I not your husband? Shouldn't you tell me everything?"

Inhaling deeply, I shifted slightly to face him better. I gulped, unsure of how to say it.

"I felt bad... when you left me alone."

He looked at me silently, then reached out to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. "I left... because I didn't want to hurt you,"

"But you weren't hurting me," I said immediately.

"I was afraid I might... if I didn't stop," he said softly.

I shook my head. "But you weren't hurting me, Hukum."

He smiled widely. "Alright, I won't leave you next time," then leaned in to kiss my forehead. "Promise."

I looked up at him, and a faint smile curved my lips. He smiled even more in return.

"Has anyone ever told you... you look so adorably beautiful when you're angry?"

I shook my head. "No."

He pulled me closer.

"I'm sorry. I won't do that again," he whispered, releasing a quiet sigh.

I looked into his eyes, knitting my brows slightly.

"But... why'd you think you'd hurt me?" I asked.

I blinked slowly as he moved closer with a smile and pulled me in by holding my hand.

I inhaled deeply and saw him extending his arm toward me. I lifted myself slightly and placed my head on his arm. The mild fragrance of his cologne drifted into my senses, and I lowered my gaze from his eyes.

It was... comfortable.

I shut my eyes briefly, and when I opened them, I caught a glimpse of his bare chest.

"I don't know. I thought... maybe I would end up touching you in a way you wouldn't like," he said, and I knit my brows in confusion.

I angled my face to look at him.

"What do you mean?"

I observed how his calm, peaceful face looked so different from when we were kissing.

He smiled faintly and pulled the comforter up to our midribs. "I mean... I was afraid I might lose control. That I might touch you in places you wouldn't be comfortable with," he said.

I still felt puzzled. "What places?"

He inhaled deeply and lifted his hand toward my face, gently tucking a loose lock behind my ear.

"You tell me, what places would you not want me to touch?" he asked.

I frowned slightly, trying to make sense of it. He had touched my face while hugging me, my back while tying the knot of my blouse, and my feet on our wedding night. He had always touched my hands and my waist.

And I disliked none of those touches.

"There's none," I replied.

He raised a brow. "Are you sure?"

I nodded. "Yes. You've touched my cheeks, my feet, my hands, my waist, my back... everywhere,"

He chuckled softly. "Oh, yes. I remember."

His gaze lingered on me with quiet amusement. I narrowed my eyes, suddenly suspicious of his smile.

Oh no.

Yes, he hadn't touched my chest.

And the thought alone sent a sharp shiver down my spine. I immediately lowered my gaze and shut my eyes, feeling warmth rising to my cheeks.

"What happened?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Nothing. Good night," I muttered quickly and turned to face away from him.

Did he mean... my chest? But why would he need to touch me there?

"What happened, Aishwarya?" he asked again, shifting closer behind me. I felt him hover beside me.

I turned slightly to glance back at him. "Nothing."

He didn't say anything, just kept looking at me quietly, then leaned in and pressed a gentle kiss to my forehead.

"You know you're so precious to me," he whispered.

I furrowed my brows slightly. "Why?"

His arm slid gently across my chest, and his fingers brushed feather-light along my cheek. My heart skipped a beat, racing wildly in my chest as our eyes met.

"Because I'll never find another girl like you," he said.

I laughed softly. "But there are so many women who look like me. I don't even look like a princess."

He frowned a little. "There may be many... but no one has your innocence, your patience, your emotions, your care, your talents, your voice, your hair, your shame, your eyes, or your lips. No one cooks like you. No one sings like you. There's no one like you, Aishwarya."

A slight smile tugged at the corners of my lips. My heart pounded, and I felt a shy, warm sensation grow within me.

"Hukum... I never thought about myself that way," I admitted, and he smiled.

"That's what makes you special. You never put yourself first."

I nodded faintly. Maybe he was right. But no one had ever told me that before. So how would I have known?

"But Hukum... don't you think all women are like this? Women care for their husbands, their children, their families... then how am I any different?"

He reached for my hand and held it slowly. "Aishwarya... you're like my mother," he said, holding my gaze.

I swallowed nervously as he mentioned his mother and looked away.

He lowered his head, resting it beside mine as we lay together, and nervously traced the edge of my bangle.

I closed my eyes and couldn't help but reach for his hand. "I'm sorry... for your mother," I said quietly.

His breath was blowing against my cheek. "You're just like her." His voice sounded hoarse and heavy with emotion. "She was innocent, selfless, and loving, just like you. She gave everything to my father. Not every good person gets something good in return, Aishwarya." His words broke something inside me.

I turned my gaze to him, and he looked into my eyes.

"She gave birth to three brilliant sons. She got everything," I said calmly. "Wherever she is now, she must be so proud of you three."

"You think?" he asked, and I nodded.

"I can bet my life on it."

He chuckled softly. "You know about her?" he asked, and I nodded again.

"Yes, Jiji told me everything she knew,"

He blinked slowly, going quiet for a moment. "She trusted my father a lot," he began, "She loved him immensely and gave everything she had, but..."

"But?" I prompted gently.

He looked up at me and continued, "But it was never enough for him. His hunger never stopped."

My brows pulled together in confusion. "Hunger for what?"

He inhaled a deep breath and said, "Hunger for women."

I stared at him, stunned. "Oh..."

"What would he do with the women?" I asked carefully.

He lowered his gaze, and a brief silence fell between us. Then he looked up again.

"He made them... produce babies."

A strange twist coiled in my stomach. "Babies?" I repeated, almost uncertainly.

He nodded. "He always saw women as a way to satisfy his urges... and a means to bear children. I hate him so much for it."

I swallowed hard. "Hukum... you don't like babies?"

He looked at me in silence for a moment before his lips curved into a smile. "I want babies... but only from you. Not from an entire village of women." His words came with a mix of frustration and tenderness, and I couldn't help the laughter that escaped me.

"Village?" I giggled.

I didn't know why... but it made me laugh even more. He laughed too, pulling me closer, and wrapped his arm around me.

I closed my eyes, giving in to the warmth. "Hukum?" He hummed softly against my cheek in response. "Can I ask you something?"

“Yes, Aishwarya,” he murmured, still tracing the gold bangles on my wrist, and I took a deep breath before voicing the thought that had lingered in my mind.

“I’m a girl, and so I wasn’t allowed to see you before our wedding. But... why didn’t you ask to see me? How could you agree to marry someone without even knowing her?”

He opened his eyes slowly and looked at me. A moment of silence passed before he replied.

“I don’t know,” he said quietly. “It all happened so suddenly. When your father offered your hand in marriage... I just couldn’t say no. It felt like it was meant to happen.”

I looked at him nervously. “Are you happy with me, Hukum?”

He leaned in, kissed my cheek softly, and nodded. “Very happy.”

A smile played on my lips as I tried to calm my racing heartbeat. “Are you?” he asked.

“Ji,” I replied with a shy smile.

He kissed my cheek again, and I could feel his body relaxing into sleep. “Good night, Aishwarya,” he whispered.

“Good night, Hukum,” I replied softly.

The weather had turned chilly with winter, but the warmth of his body wrapped around mine made me feel safe and peaceful.

In his comforting arms, I didn’t even realise when I fell asleep.



I woke up to the sound of birds and a soft brightness pressing against my eyelids.

I sat up straight and looked toward the window.

How did I sleep in so late?

I quickly slipped out of bed. Hukum was already up; he wasn’t there beside me.

Just then, Moni entered the bedroom, and I immediately asked, "Where is Hukum?"

She smiled. "He's practising fencing,"

I furrowed my brows. "Oh..."

"You can go see him if you want," she offered kindly. "Shall I take you there?" she asked, and I responded with a question of my own,

"Can you?"

"Why wouldn't I?" she said lightly, and I smiled.

"Okay."

"Okay," she repeated with a grin.

"Let me freshen up first," I said.

She nodded and walked into the bathing chamber to prepare my bath. I quickly finished my morning routine and came out, finding Moni waiting patiently for me.

Smiling, she helped me walk through the hallways of the chamber. After a short walk, she stopped and pointed ahead.

"He's there," she said.

I nodded, looking toward the door in front of me. As Moni turned back to leave, I nervously stepped forward.

As soon as I entered, I saw the garden spread before me.

It was a spacious, roofed area, but with only two walls on either side. The front was completely open to the outdoors. My eyes wandered to the walls lined with swords, spears, and other weapons of war gleaming in the morning light.

I stepped further inside, searching for him, and then my eyes found him.

There he was, holding a sword in one hand.

His upper body was bare, clothed only in a dhoti. His chest and arms glistened with sweat, and his muscles were perfectly taut and well defined. The sight of him stole the breath from my lips.

Suddenly, he turned in my direction, but his eyes remained fixed on the sword. Beads of sweat trickled down

his forehead, slipping to his neck and chest. I blinked, unable to look away.

I took another step forward, and that's when he noticed me.

"Good morning, Aishwarya," he called out from a distance.

I lowered my head slightly. "Good morning, Hukum."

My heartbeat quickened as he suddenly smiled and walked toward me, still holding the bare sword in one hand.

He stopped near me and reached for the jug and glass resting on a small stool to my side. Calmly, he poured himself some water and drank it.

I didn't know why, but just watching him drink made my throat dry. I blinked nervously and attempted to speak. "Is there... any war coming soon?"

He looked at me and smiled, shaking his head. "No. I'm just practising."

I nodded slowly.

There had always been one small wish in my heart to hold a sword... just once. But in my home, such a thought was unthinkable. Even suggesting it had earned me scolding looks.

But would he let me?

"Hukum," I said softly.

He simply hummed without looking up, still adjusting his grip.

My voice was hesitant. "Can I... hold that sword? Just once?"

He paused for a moment, then nodded. "Yes, of course. Come here." And I stepped closer.

He clasped the sword with one hand and offered the hilt toward me. I hesitated, then slowly reached out, with sweaty palms.

He kept the blade steady as I wrapped my hand around the grip. It felt heavier than I had imagined.

He slowly loosened his hold, and in that moment, the weight shifted. The blade dipped forward, too fast.

Before I could react, the tip swayed toward his chest.

"Hukum!" I gasped.

He acted swiftly, pressing his palm against the sharp edge to stop it from touching him.

"Dhyaan se." (Careful.) he spoke with a firm voice.

But then I noticed his hand bleeding.

My heart pounded as I watched the blood trail down his hand. My grip on the sword weakened.

"Hukum..." My lips quivered, and tears sprang to my eyes.

I immediately let go of the sword's handle and looked up at him with fear and regret.

"It's alright, it's just a cut," he said calmly, as if it were nothing.

But my heart felt like it had split in two.

"No, no, no... your hand is bleeding, Hukum!" My voice shook as I tried to speak. But he only smiled at me, still holding the sword in his injured hand, as if nothing had happened.

He tightened his grip and gently took it away from me. "Leave it," he said.

I looked down, watching thick, dark red droplets fall to the floor and mix with the dust.

A lump formed in my throat.

His other hand took mine softly and turned me away from the scene.

"Come here," he said.

But my eyes were still stuck on the blood.

It had happened because of me.

Why? Why do I always end up being a misfortune to those around me?

If I hadn't asked to hold the sword, it would never have happened.

He led me back to the chamber and called out, "Can someone bring a bandage?"

An attendant rushed into the room moments later, carrying one.

I saw him kneel in front of Hukum, and my heart flipped.

No, it should be me. I caused this wound, so I should be the one to bandage it.

"Wait," I managed to say, nearly choking me on the lump in my throat.

The attendant looked up at me. I glanced between him and Hukum, then added softly, "I can do it."

Hukum looked at the man and took the bandage from him. "Thank you, you may leave."

I stepped forward as the attendant rose and left. Then I slowly lowered myself beside Hukum. My hands were still trembling as I reached out to take the bandage from him.

"I'm so sorry, Hukum. I'm really... truly sorry."

He looked away from his bleeding hand to meet my eyes.

"Koi baat nahi, Aishwarya. Talwar haath mein lete hain to ek-do ghaav to yun hi pad jaate hain." (It's alright, Aishwarya. A few scratches are normal when you hold a sword.) he spoke so gently, trying to soothe me, but I could barely breathe.

I drew a deep breath and reached out carefully. His hand was covered in blood. Still, he shifted slightly closer to me, making it easier.

I wrapped the bandage slowly, afraid of hurting him more.

Then, his voice cut through the silence. ***"Aap itna darti kyun hain humse, Aishwarya?"*** (Why are you so scared of me, Aishwarya?)

A sharp tightness wrapped around my chest.

I did not fear him. I was afraid of hurting him. Of making him angry.

He was the only one who had ever made me feel... better. And I couldn't afford to lose that. But my foolishness always led me to that very place.

"I'm afraid of hurting you, Hukum."

I felt his eyes on me as I finished wrapping the bandage. My heart thundered beneath my ribs.

He was watching me. I could feel his gaze lower to my neck and my collarbones.

"If that's so," he murmured, "then this would be the most beautiful wound of my life, Aishwarya." As he replied, his gaze lingered on my neck.

I hesitated and slowly pulled my hand back. The touch of his skin tingled on my fingertips.

I looked up into his eyes.

Sweat was sliding down the strands of his hair, across his temples, over his cheekbones. His chest, still glistening with sweat, rose and fell with every calm breath.

I swallowed and pressed my lips together to wet the dryness in my throat.

"Bai-sa," Moni's voice came from the door.

I shot to my feet instinctively, but before I could move away, he swiftly pulled me back into his lap, making me gasp.

"Come later," he called out, and I stared, wide-eyed.

I turned to see Moni retreating.

"Hukum..." My voice barely left my throat, feeling nerves rising like a wave.

And suddenly, he stood lifting me into his arms.

I gasped, wrapping my arms instinctively around his neck to steady myself.

His smile deepened as my chest flushed against his.

"Now that you've injured my right hand," he said in a teasing but low tone, "don't you think you should become my right hand until it heals?"

A strong shiver coursed through me as he stepped toward the bathing chamber. My heart pounded wildly at his words. And my cheeks... burned with warmth I could no longer deny.

"But... what will I have to do?" I asked quietly.

He looked at me with a slight smirk. My eyes lowered to his wounded hand, close to my midriff.

"For now, just help me take a bath."

My eyes widened. "Me?" The word slipped out in haste.

He smiled. "Would you prefer ten attendants touching me here and there?"

Before I could respond, he gently set me down on the floor.

I quickly adjusted my clothes and tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear as my dupatta slipped from my head. His words echoed in my ears, stirring something strange in my chest. I didn't understand the feeling... but the thought of other women touching him was making something tighten inside me.

And I was also responsible for his injury. Why should the attendants suffer for what I'd done?

"What are you thinking?" he asked, and I lifted my eyes.

"Nothing," I whispered, blinking nervously as I watched him walk toward the steps leading into the bathing pool.

The scent of mild lavender and sandalwood in the air only heightened my nerves.

"Come here, then," he said in a low voice.

"Ji."

My heart beat loud enough to echo in my ears as I stepped closer. As he descended into the pool, the water rose to his chest. He spread his arms along the rim of the pool behind him, relaxing, but something in the room felt tense. The sound of my anklet bells and wedding bangles only made the silence feel heavier.

I walked over slowly and knelt behind him.

He angled his head back slightly. "Are you nervous, Aishwarya?"

I didn't know why, but his question made me even more nervous.

I nodded faintly. "Ji."

He chuckled softly and dipped his hand into the water, and a few cold droplets splashed against my skin.

I closed my eyes for a second, feeling goosebumps spread across my arms.

What am I feeling?

I placed my hand over my chest, trying to calm the frantic thumping of my heart.

Suddenly, he jerked up and sat on the edge of the pool wall, right in front of me. His intense yet unreadable gaze met mine and dropped to the bowl of bathing paste beside us.

Taking it in his hand, he passed it to me, and I accepted it with trembling fingers.

He extended his arm, inviting me to apply it. But just as I reached forward, he pulled his arm back with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

“No need, Aishwarya.”

I frowned. “But... why, Hukum?”

He smiled again and moved a little closer. “Because I have two hands.”

Then, without waiting, he took more paste with his left hand and began applying it over his body. My eyes followed his movements helplessly. Each motion felt deliberately slow.

He reached back, trying to spread the paste over his back, but his bulging arm made it difficult, and a low groan escaped his lips.

“Let me do it,” I said softly.

He looked at me again. “Are you sure, Aishwarya?”

My heart skipped a beat just at the sound of my name, yet I managed a nod.

“Ji. It happened because of me. This is the least I can do to make up for it.”

He held my gaze for a moment longer, then nodded. “Okay,” and turned slightly to give me access.

I dipped my fingers into the bowl and scooped up the paste. Then, gently, I placed my hands on his wet back.

His skin was warm and tanned, slightly rough, with broad shoulders. I moved my palms from the top of his back downward, spreading the paste in slow strokes. His waist

narrowed below the muscular frame of his shoulders, and the contrast made me swallow hard.

I took more paste and continued, sliding both hands carefully.

The feel of his body, the rhythm of my touch... I couldn't explain it. I felt a strange, pulsing wetness in my core. My very same ink-stained fingers had once tangled in his hair during a kiss I could still feel on my lips. The memory was dizzying.

"I'm so sorry for the pain, Hukum," I whispered.

For a few long moments, he said nothing. Then slowly he turned to look at me.

"Don't apologise," he said in a low voice. "I believe in paying back."

I blinked. "What do you mean?"

His gaze dropped to my lips, making my breath catch, then, again, his eyes lifted to mine.

"I'll return the pain... soon."

My stomach twisted, my heartbeat roared in my chest, and I looked away.

Will he hurt me? Is he going to cut my hand as repayment? But...

Maybe he should. Maybe I deserved it.

"Will you let me?" he asked softly.

I lifted my eyes to him. I didn't know what he was truly asking. But still... I nodded.

"Ji."

A wide smile lit up his face, and the next moment, he jumped into the pool, sending a splash of water straight at me. A startled gasp escaped my lips as the cool water hit my skin, drenching me from head to toe.

"Aishwarya," he called out.

I turned my head slightly to look at him. He tilted his head to one side and rolled his eyes with a playful grin. "Come inside."

A timid smile appeared on my lips without warning. I tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear and shook my head lightly.

"I don't think it's a good idea. You're getting late for work. You should finish your bath. I'll bathe later," I muttered softly.

He inhaled deeply, nodding with a hint of resignation. Silence lingered between us for a few moments. I watched as he stepped closer, standing mid-pool, where the water was deeper. I was still near the shallow end. He raked his fingers through his wet hair, sweeping back the strands falling over his eyes.

I gulped at the sight as it sent a strange, chilling shiver down my spine. With his broad forehead, wet lips, and glowing skin, his presence always managed to shudder my insides.

"Ever heard of saving water, Aishwarya?" he asked, raising his brows. "And saving the labour and energy of attendants," he added with a teasing smile.

I lowered my gaze, digging my teeth into my bottom lip with shyness.

Actually, I had. He was right. Why waste the attendants' time when we could easily manage?

I took a deep breath, gathering courage, and slowly dipped my feet into the pool. The water kissed my skin with a soothing warmth. His presence made me both timid and brave at the same time.

He stretched his hand toward me. I hesitated briefly, but the knots in my stomach loosened as our fingers touched. He gripped my hand and pulled me gently into the pool.

His gaze was both intense and playful. I had learned. He had very few expressions. Calmness and focus when he worked. A slight smile when I was near. But when he looked at me without blinking, holding his gaze longer than usual, that was his intense gaze. And it always meant something was coming.

I stepped into the pool with a soft gasp as the cool water wrapped around me up to my waist, and a giggle escaped me.

Where had life brought me? I couldn't believe this was real. Everything felt so dreamlike.

He let go of my hand, and I turned, gliding through the water in gentle strokes. There was no particular reason; it was pure joy. Or the reason stood right in front of me.

As our eyes met, he smiled, and I felt a tightening in my stomach as he slowly stepped closer. His height always made my mind go quiet. The chaos gradually retreated into calm.

His smile faded, replaced by something deeper. A deep churn stirred in my stomach at the way he licked his lips.

I lowered my gaze, sensing what might come. The way he looked at me, I felt stripped bare despite my clothes.

Of course, my dupatta had already slipped off my head.

I shivered as his fingers gently brushed the outline of my ear. My face tilted slightly at his touch, and my lashes shut on their own. Suddenly, the world felt smaller, as if only we existed.

A playful thought crossed my mind. The moment he jumped in and splashed me flashed before me.

Without warning, I flicked my hand in the water, sending a splash across his face.

He shut his eyes in brief surprise, and I giggled at the sight.

"Aishwarya," he said, amused. I did it again. "Stop!" he exclaimed, shielding himself with a hand.

I splashed again, and he backed up, laughing.

My voice echoed in the bathing chamber as I laughed to my heart's content. Again, I moved forward, splashing and playing like a child.

"Aishwarya," he called, but this time his voice was deeper, despite his laughing.

"Ji, Hukum," I grinned, raising both hands to make the splash bigger.

Suddenly, he caught my wrist and pulled me toward him. My back hit the wall with a soft thud, and I gasped as the water rose to my chest.

My heart pounded as he stepped even closer, filling the last bit of distance between us.

"You're being a really naughty wife, aren't you?" he mumbled over my lips.

My laughter vanished. My gaze flickered between his eyes and his chest, pressed hot and rough against mine. His hand slid around my waist, and his fingers touched my bare skin beneath the wet cloth, sending tremors up my spine.

"I am... sorry," I whispered, casting my lashes south. Our surroundings blurred as I felt him leaning in. It was dizzying and hair-raising, and I knew what was ahead.

His lips collided with mine.

My head tilted back and pressed against the stone wall as the urgency of his kiss struck me like a wave. His lips moved over mine with hungry intent, causing my whole body to tremble beneath his touch.

He sucked at my lips, not gently, not carefully, but with a heated pull that made my breath falter.

A soft cry escaped me when he gave me a moment to breathe.

His fingers tightened at my waist, and his other hand cradled the back of my neck. His thumb pressed lightly against my throat, anchoring his warmth through me. I stretched upward on my toes, instinctively chasing him as his sucking deepened, more intense than anything before.

My eyes fluttered shut, feeling my lips melting into his, and his tongue touched mine.

I opened my mouth, gasping for air. My hands coiled around his shoulders as I tried to balance on my toes. A wave of pain hit me as his hold on my neck stretched me back tightly against the wall.

"Hukum," I breathed.

He pulled back slightly, panting against my lips.

"Do you know what my favourite colour is?" he asked huskily, breathing over my lips. I shook my head faintly, feeling my stomach tighten at that familiar wetness pooling low in my core. "The same honey that's covered every inch of you," he whispered.

I blinked nervously as his lips still grazed mine with soft kisses.

"Why so?" my voice trembled with curiosity. No one had ever said something like that to me. And I wanted to understand the reason behind it.

He pressed his lips to mine again gently, yet the sensation made a cry slip from my lips, and my head arched back against the wall.

"It can cover all of my sins... for the world outside to see."

His words sent a chill down my spine. My brows furrowed.

Sins?

He drew back slightly, holding his eyes to mine for a moment before his lips trailed down to my jaw.

"Sins?" I asked as his mouth moved lower, closer to my neck, causing my knees to wobble.

Oh my God.

I bit down on my lip as a fresh wave of sensations took over my body, leaving me all hot and trembling in unfamiliar places.

"Yes, sins," he murmured against my neck.

His hand slid lower down my back, and his lips touched the base of my neck. My lower body pressed helplessly against his. I shut my eyes, unsure of what was happening to me. What were these strange new waves inside me?

My fingers dug into his shoulder as I felt him slowly suck my skin. My heart thundered wildly. I felt something warm trickling through my core. It was wet, which, surprisingly, made me feel both weak and content.

Suddenly, his lips parted, and something sharp touched me.

A cry tore from me uncontrollably, and I bit hard on my lower lip to silence myself.

"Hukum..." Tears gathered in my eyes as I felt his teeth sink into me. I breathed hoarsely, trembling beneath him.

"You make me feel so out of control, Aishwarya," he groaned against my neck, then soothed the burn, leaving a trail of wet kisses along the curve.

He pulled back at last, and I felt a tender sting where his lips had been. My fingers trembled even to touch it.

I looked into his eyes, lost in confusion.

What did he just do to me? Why... does it feel like this? Why is my body responding like this?

I felt pain, but I didn't cry. I felt weak, but somehow it felt right.

"It... was a bite?" I asked, unable to stop myself.

"Did you like it?" he countered, his gaze still fixed on mine. I blinked in a daze, and my lips parted. "Yes." I nodded.

He kissed me again, softer this time. And I surrendered to the sensation, realising I liked being near him and being the one who had his full attention. "Hukum," I whispered.

He pulled back just enough to look me in the eye. "Hmm?"

I blinked slowly. "How... how do I make you feel out of control?"

A faint smile tugged at his lips. "You already know it, Aishwarya."

I frowned. "Do I?"

His hand moved from my back to my waist. His fingers found my waist chain and tugged me closer. Our chests crashed into each other, my body tipping on its toes. I could feel his knuckle pressing hard into my stomach; it almost made me gasp.

His lips moved close to my ear, and I shuddered. His breath was warm, and his lips were wet as they sucked my skin. My nipples hardened instantly, and my eyes fluttered shut. His voice came low and slow, feathering against my ear.

“Your eyes on me... they make me feel special, always. The desire dripping from them... it makes me feel like a sinner. And when you look at me uncertainly, in confusion, I lose control. I feel like ruining you so badly. I wish to fill my ears with your sound, the one you don’t even know you have. I want to make every bit of you mine: your mind, your soul, your body. I feel like a sinner when I yearn to see myself live inside your memory, inside your skin, in everything you are. I feel so corrupted to want you to feel what you’re scared to feel... to feel everything that makes you tremble, everything that has you gasping for breath, and everything you think you shouldn’t feel.”

A full-body shiver ran down my spine. My chest rose, and I exhaled shakily. “Huh...?”



12 Ranvijay

The soft tremble in her voice sent a jolt down my spine, making my eyes fall shut as I gave in to the warmth of her embrace. Her small arms were slowly becoming my escape from responsibilities, from my duties, from the unshakeable image I'd been forced to protect all my life.

What was this side of me she had awakened so effortlessly? I didn't even know he existed. It felt like I was meeting a new self that was lost in desire, need, and a craving so fierce it left me in a haze.

"Hukum," she whispered, close to my ear. I inhaled deeply, unable to stop myself from pressing my lips there, brushing the edge of her gold jhumkas. They tickled against my cheek.

I felt her palms press against my chest, trying gently to create space. But the difference in our strength made it futile. She then held my wrist.

I could feel her heart hammering wildly, her stomach writhing against mine. But I didn't want space.

I wanted closeness. I wanted to feel every inch of her... not just her body, but her mind, her soul.

She was so naïve. So innocent. And I wanted to keep her that way... but only for me. Her thoughts, her dreams, her breath should belong to no one but me.

For the first time, I didn't know how to express what I felt. The ache to possess her and the thrill of knowing that she was already mine. Not completely, not yet... but soon.

Those dazzling eyes, those dark lashes that fluttered with timidity beneath them... Her lips that constantly quivered under mine... That impossibly small waist that fit just right in my arms... Her untouched skin...

Oh, my God. She was everything I had longed for—the one I wanted to give my all to. And take everything from. Even

the last ounce of innocence in her... and the last of mine. A fair exchange.

She would be my first, and I would be hers. And beyond that, a life together. In joy. In pain.

My lips felt dry against her ear as I sensed her body beginning to falter from the force of the sensations rippling across her skin. She was the gold I probably didn't know I was looking for. And yet she was the softest clay I longed to mould with my own hands.

She was mine. My wife. My Aishwarya.

I moved my hand from her waist chain to wrap around her entirely. Her waist was so slender that my fingers met across her midriff. I pulled her up, raising her to my height, and held her by her nape. Her body trembled as I pressed my lips to the curve of her neck.

Her hands gripped the base of my neck, and her lips brushed against my ear.

"Hukum..." she whispered in a shaky voice.

"Hmm?" I breathed back, grazing my tongue on her neck, greedily tasting the goosebumps dancing across her skin.

"I'm... feeling something..." Her voice was weak, breathless, as if even breathing had become difficult.

"Do you want me to stop?" I asked gently.

She inclined her head back, her expression one of confusion. "I... I don't know..."

Her voice broke, and my hand... it ached to touch more of her, especially her chest. I was burning, completely aroused, every nerve ending screaming for release.

At that moment, I wanted to leave, but the storm of anger waiting for me later made me hesitate. *She's cute.*

I straightened my head and looked into her eyes. Her brows were pulled together in a state of conflict. I saw both fear and desire. I could feel that she wanted this. And yet, she was scared of it.

"Aishwarya," I called softly.

Her lips wobbled as she answered. "Ji,"

My eyes darted from her eyes to her collarbone and then to her shoulders. She was so fine.

God, I wanted to touch her everywhere. Ruin her innocence. Drown in her moans. But most of all, at that moment, I ached for her breasts. I needed to feel her softness against my palm.

“Do you remember what you saw back at the waterfall?” I asked, keeping my voice low.

She opened her eyes, lowering her gaze to my lips. “Yes... I do.”

I closed my eyes and kissed her firmly. And for the first time, our lips moved in sync. As I applied pressure, her face tilted slightly back, and the moment I pulled away from my first deep stroke of the kiss, she caught my lips and sucked them in return.

Oh my heavens!!!

I was electrified by the intensity of her kiss and desire; it aroused me.

She clutched the red thread around my neck and pulled herself back for just a moment to look into my eyes.

“Keep going, Aishwarya...” I whispered.

And she kissed me again, fiercely. She was devouring me, and I let her. I let her lead. Let her explore.

My hands slowly drifted downward toward her chest.

“May I?” I asked between the gaps of our kiss, my fingers already itching to feel her breasts.

“Yes... please.”

Those two words sent a shockwave through me.

As I placed my hand on her breast, she inhaled sharply, trembling under my touch.

“Hukum...” she breathed right into my mouth.

I closed my eyes, feeling her hard, tight bud of her nipple against my palm. Her soft curves kept teasing the edges of my restraint. I was overwhelmed and unbearably hard, desperate for release.

“Oh, my... Aishwarya...”

I groaned against her lips as her short nails dug into the skin at the base of my neck.

Her breasts were small for my hand but unbelievably soft and tight, which was driving me to the edge. Even her nipple... was so tiny. She was just nineteen, untouched, unknown. God, she was so damn beautiful.

"I'm... feeling... some... thing..." Her words faltered against my mouth. I felt her body tremble as my hand cupped her bosom. My palm felt the gentle rise and fall of her chest as she breathed deeply.

"Like what?" I asked, applying pressure to her breast. Her body jolted, yet our trembling lips moved in perfect sync.

"I don't know..." Her voice was wrapped in a dizzy haze of first-time sensation.

"Should I stop?" I asked again, slower this time, letting my hand press softly once more. The fabric of her blouse was coarse beneath my skin, and I worried briefly, just for a moment, that it might leave a mark or a bruise.

"No... I can't think properly," she whispered, and I bit my lip at her response.

"That's good," I breathed, brushing my nose against hers. "You don't have to think. Just feel. Feel what's between us."

She opened her eyes, and for a moment, our gazes locked.

"I... I feel like I'm going to faint, Hukum," she whispered, blinking slowly. I was captivated by the sight of her parted, swollen lips. Her cheeks were hot beneath my lips as I kissed the side of her face, just an inch from her mouth. My hand remained steady, feeling the soft, vulnerable rise and fall of her chest.

"You won't. Do you trust me?" I asked gently, searching her eyes.

"Yes," she answered without hesitation, and I pressed her breast, feeling her wriggle under me.

A soft, helpless sound escaped her as her stomach tensed and her thighs clenched together.

“Hukum... I feel...sick,” she murmured.

I kissed her cheek lightly. “I feel...sick too, Aishwarya. Do you want me to stop?”

She shook her head frantically. “No. Please... don’t leave me.”

I pushed her back firmly against the pool wall. Her head rested on the edge, and her body arched beneath mine as our lips met again. My hand pressed harder against her bosom, feeling desperate.

My erection throbbed as her wild breaths broke over my lips, her heartbeat pounding so loud I could almost hear it. Her whole body was shaking.

With a moan, she shut her eyes tightly and bit down on her lower lip. I kissed her immediately.

“Don’t do that, Aishwarya. Let me hear you.” I whispered, and she let go of her lip, opening her mouth in a silent gasp as her nails sank deeper into my neck.

Things turned steamier and more intense as I pressed my palm against her bosom greedily.

Her moans grew louder. She cried out again, and I felt my body stiffen, close to release.

Her chest heaved beneath my touch, struggling with each breath.

“Look at me, Aishwarya,” I urged.

Her heavy eyes fluttered open, and I didn’t stop. I couldn’t. Her softness filled my fist, and I pressed my forehead against hers.

“Argh...” A throaty sound escaped me. “This... this is what you do to me. You drive me insane. Out of control. You make me want to do things like this to you, every time.”

“Hukum...” she gasped, barely able to catch her breath.

“I feel it too, Aishwarya. Just like you... I feel sick too.”

Another deep moan escaped her, and I shut my eyes.

I pressed myself tightly against her as my body shuddered. The ecstasy hit like lightning, and I bit my lip hard to keep from groaning aloud.

I felt the tremors rock through me. My release washed over me in waves.

She cried out suddenly, and I blinked back into focus.

Damn, I'd held her too hard.

As soon as my hand loosened, her brows creased in pain, and her lips trembled.

I kissed her cheek softly, feeling remorse crash in like a tide. Turning her again, I pressed my back against the pool wall and drew her into my arms. Holding her gently, I caressed her breasts.

"I'm so sorry..." I whispered.

She didn't speak at first, just wrapped her arms around my shoulders and rested all her weight on me. Her head dropped onto my shoulder, and she hid her face in the crook of my neck.

"Is it hurting, Aishwarya?" I spoke softly, my chest heavy with regret.

She was quiet for a long moment before murmuring into my neck: "Yes... But it wasn't even."

A hesitant smile curved my lips. "Were you expecting something fair? Like... a cut from a sword?"

She lifted her head to look at me and nodded.

I chuckled softly, watching her flushed, dazed face. She stared at me silently, blinking once, and then her head tilted back ever so slightly.

And suddenly, she sneezed.

Oh, my baby.

I smiled, adoring the sight of her. She timidly lowered her gaze, only for another sneeze to escape her.

Her lashes fluttered as she shyly looked away.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, barely audible. "Hukum..." she added quietly, her gaze still downcast.

"Yes?" I replied, tucking a damp strand of hair behind her ear. Her eyes lifted slowly to mine. Our breathing had finally begun to settle.

"I think... you should take a bath again," she murmured. "Outside the pool," she added, almost too softly.

I frowned slightly. "Why?"

She blinked in uncertainty, and her lips trembled again, as if she were unsure how to say it.

"I think... I peed a little..." Her voice was a whisper, barely reaching my ears.

I nibbled my lower lip to stop myself from smiling. "Oh."

A wave of something warm and dizzying rushed through me. It was her innocence, something so unfiltered and sweet, that I felt like I could melt.

I leaned in and gently kissed her forehead. "Thank you for telling me. That might be the best part of my day," She blinked in confusion. I smiled wider and added, "Also, you should take a bath again, too."

She furrowed her brow. "Why? Did you pee too?"

I chuckled and gave a light nod. Her eyes widened, and then she laughed.

"I think we both need to see a physician," she said between soft laughs. "Something's very wrong with us."

I kissed her cheek again. "There's nothing wrong. We're perfectly normal."

She looked at me, a little puzzled, but nodded slowly. "Okay. Then... I think I know the solution."

"You do?" I asked.

She gave a small nod, then buried her face in my neck. Her voice was gruff, yet soft against my skin. "I feel so happy with you. You talk to me, and you make me feel... different."

I held her tighter and began walking toward the pool's edge with her still in my arms.

She sneezed again.

I looked at her with a raised eyebrow. "Have you had your seeds yet or not?" They'd help warm her from the inside and ease the cold.

“No. I will now,” she said, sniffing, and I helped her out of the pool.



13 Aishwarya

My gaze danced across my skin through the mirror. Droplets of water trickled down the damp strands of my hair, wrapped into a tight bun. My eyes drifted to my neck, where a deep red bruise had bloomed, mixed with my dark brown complexion. It was as big as a walnut.

I remembered how he kissed me there and slowly bit me.

It hadn't felt like the sharp bite a child gives, like the painful one my sister's two-year-old once gave me on the cheek. This... this was different. A sweet, aching kind of bite. A caring bite.

I could still feel Hukum's lips on my neck. The gentle brush of his mouth, the way his jaw leaned in closer, parting for soft kisses, then widening, deepening, as if he were trying to consume me. Like someone bites into an apple.

Open-mouthed, with his teeth, the way he wrapped his lips around my skin, sucking it slowly, shook me to the core.

It felt like lightning ran through me, like the crack and roll of thunder during the monsoon. It shook me. Trembled through me. It made me dizzy.

And then the way he slowly yet deeply sucked, as if he were trying to drink something from my skin. Like a baby suckling its mother's breast for milk. But it didn't feel anything like that.

It was heavy and slightly painful. I remembered my eyes stinging with tears when he did that... but it hadn't been harsh.

I hadn't even screamed.

Why hadn't I?

It was a gentle bite, playful, like he wanted to tease me. Like he wanted me to feel everything I was feeling. Maybe he liked that...

But why? Was it to make me feel good? Or bad?

It felt good. Beyond good. A kind of feeling I didn't know existed. More than his nearness. More than his voice or his gaze. It was powerful... yet so gentle and slow.

My eyes slowly dropped to my reflection, noticing the parts of me I had never truly looked at before.

I was in the dressing room, drying off after the bath. After we stepped out of the pool, Hukum quickly took his turn, changing behind the curtain while I respectfully kept my gaze turned. He left soon after, probably for court, allowing me privacy to bathe alone.

And indeed, I was alone, standing in front of the mirror, with my wet clothes clinging to me.

I pulled the strings of my blouse at the back and slowly slipped the shoulders down. I saw the high bones of my collar, the shadows of my shoulders, and then... my breasts. Never had I seen myself like this.

My nipples were perked.

I lowered my gaze to my upper midriff and took my time, tracing the curve of one breast. As my thumb brushed the side of my nipple, it stung. Not sharp, but tender. A leftover ache from how his palm had pressed firmly.

It wasn't just a touch. It had been a full fist.

My body flushed with heat again from the memory. Was this... normal? He said we were normal.

When I looked closer, there were faint imprints of his fingers on my chest. I could still feel him. His palm, his thumb tracing my breast's curve. His long fingers pressed high enough to reach above my heart, while he caressed my nipple.

I cupped my breast gently. It felt so small. So tight. Nothing to hold, really. I doubted he could even fit it in his hand. It could easily slip away. Yet, when he pressed me there, I felt everything.

Things I never thought I would. Things I never knew existed.

I inhaled sharply and pulled the blouse lower. My wedding bangles slid down my wrist and chimed softly.

And I lifted my gaze to meet myself in the mirror.

A soft gasp slipped past my lips, staring at myself, half-naked, touching my breasts. The sunlight poured into the chamber, illuminating one shoulder and one side of my chest. It felt warm, like his hand had felt.

Tiny baby hairs on my skin stood up, sending a shiver through me.

Will he ever look at me like this? Half-naked. Exposed.

To touch me again? To see? Will he like me like this?

The fine shadows of my bones on my chest, my narrow waist, my small navel... I was so small compared to him.

"Aishwarya,"

I jumped at the sudden sound of his voice behind the door. Before I could breathe, the door creaked open.

Panicked, I grabbed my dupatta and threw it across my chest.

As I spun around, my back hit the dressing table with a thud. A few small items toppled over and fell to the floor.

"I'm sorry," His voice came from the doorway.

My eyes widened in horror—*the vermilion*.

It tipped over, causing a spill.

My heart pounded. *No... no, no, no... noooo! This can't happen.*

Tears stung my eyes and streamed down my cheeks. I dropped to my knees in a panic, clutching the dupatta tightly to my chest with one fist, the other hand reaching to gather the sacred red powder from the floor.

I heard the door close behind me. Then, there was the sound of the lock turning. And his hurried footsteps.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I didn't know..." His quiet but jarring voice travelled down my ear, pulling me into the present, reminding me of the scattered vermilion on the ground. My vision blurred instantly.

I lifted my tearful gaze and found him looking at me with worry. "Don't cry. I'll get you another bottle of it, I promise," he said gently. And just like that, I broke into harder sobs. "Hey, what happened?" he asked, his voice tight with concern.

But I couldn't stop crying. My throat ached, and my chest began to heave.

Why does everything happen to me? Why me? I had just gotten him... and now this.

I couldn't lose him. I couldn't.

"Aishwarya, look at me," he said softly, lifting my chin gently. His warm gaze, laced with worry, met mine through the veil of my tears. "What is it?" he asked again.

"It... it's not a..." I hiccuped, trying to speak. "It's... not a good sign. The vermilion shouldn't fall on the ground."

He sighed. "Okay. Okay. It's fine. There's no sign. Things happen, that's all."

But I shook my head frantically. "No... no... no. Elders have said, and even my sister once told me, that if the vermilion falls... the husband..." My voice cracked as more tears spilt down my cheeks. "...dies."

His expression changed immediately. He reached down, gently held my arm and helped me to my feet. My arms stayed tight over my chest, clutching the dupatta.

"Do you believe in your sister," he asked slowly, "or in me?"

My lips trembled. "You."

"Then trust me. Nothing will happen to me. I'll get you another bottle of vermilion." His thumb softly wiped a tear off my cheek.

But the storm inside me hadn't passed. It was rising, spreading from my chest to my limbs. My knees felt weak.

I wasn't anything without him. Not anymore.

"Hukum..."

My voice trembled as I looked up at him, filled with desperation. I saw his gaze flick quickly from my nape to my

eyes.

“Huh?”

“Don’t go anywhere. Please.”

His eyes softened, and a small smile curved at the corner of his lips.

“Aishwarya... it was nothing. You got startled when I called you and banged into the table. That’s why it fell. That’s all. It doesn’t mean—”

“Please, Hukum.” I cut him off, breathing unsteadily.

He inhaled deeply, then nodded. “Okay. But for how long should I not go anywhere?”

My gaze dropped. “I don’t know... but just... please don’t.”

There was silence briefly. Then I felt his hands on my arms, slowly turning me to face the mirror. I gasped quietly as I looked at myself, at us.

He stood behind me, watching me through the mirror.

“First,” he murmured, “you should change. You’ve already caught a cold, and staying wet will only make it worse.”

I blinked nervously. He wasn’t listening to what I meant. And I realised suddenly, with an ache in my chest, that I was still undressed, holding only the dupatta over my chest.

His gaze dropped slightly, and I felt heat crawl over my skin. The weight of his gaze made my lashes drop south.

A single drop of water trickled down the back of my neck, slipping from the ends of my hair. It tickled against my shoulder, making my breath hitch.

I could feel him watching the trail it left.

Another drop fell from my hair bun and landed square on my nape. I inhaled sharply as it slid down my back, tracing a cold line to the waistband of my skirt.

Suddenly, I felt self-conscious. My entire back was bare, open to him, and it sent a twist of something hot and cold spiralling in my stomach.

Slowly, he stepped closer and settled his hand lightly at the base of my neck, brushing his fingers gently over my

damp skin. As he leaned in, his warm breath grazed the very spot where the water had travelled.

His mouth pressed slowly against my nape. And just like that, I felt calm. It was as though the entire storm had passed in one exhale.

My lips parted, and I shifted unsteadily on my feet. The sensations began curling from the pit of my stomach.

“Hukum...” I breathed out, and he looked at me through the mirror.

“You’re so beautiful, Aishwarya.”

My gaze dropped again in confusion and shyness.

His fingers traced slowly down my spine, and I lifted my eyes, startled by the tenderness. The tip of his index finger drew a slow line down my back, making me gasp. My heartbeat raced.

“Let me help you change,” he said gently.

I shifted in place anxiously. “Huh...?” The only sound I could manage. My brain felt foggy, useless. “No... you can’t —” I started, but he interrupted me.

“That’s not a question or a request.”

Before I could respond, I felt his fingers slide into the waistband of my skirt. He tugged me back, softly but with certainty, until my bare back collided with his chest.

I could feel his eyes on my cheek, on my lips. My breath hitched, and my back arched slightly against him.

“Let me see you, Aishwarya,” he whispered. “I want to see this beautiful body.”

My heart somersaulted violently; my eyes widened with shock.

There was no beautiful body... not that he’d want one.

“What? Why?” I tried to reason.

But he moved first, sliding his one hand around my shoulder while the other came up gently, cupping the side of my throat. His palm urged my face to turn slightly, just enough to make me look at him.

"I'm your husband. I should know how beautiful my wife is," he whispered.

I blinked nervously. Our lips were suddenly closer, and our breathing faster.

And then, in a blur, he turned me fully and pulled me flush against him.

My breath caught, scared by the sudden movement.

His chest touched mine, and I felt the pressure between us where my arms were still clutching the dupatta to cover myself. It acted like a fragile wall, keeping us from skin to skin, but barely.

His hand found my nape again, and his rough fingertips traced my damp skin.

My lips parted, and my head tipped back. And unconsciously... I gave in.

What is happening to me?

The pit of my core turned wet again for the second time in a day.

In the mirror, I saw his other hand on my bare back, his dark eyes locked on my brown skin.

Our foreheads met, and his hand moved lower.

My skin prickled with shivers. I was trembling. The dizziness inside me began rising, spreading heat and terror in equal measure.

His fingers moved painfully slowly towards the waistband of my skirt.

My eyes flew open and stared into his, blinking rapidly.

I inclined back slightly, unable to carry the weight of the moment. And just when I felt the tip of his finger slip an inch beneath the waistband, something inside me jolted.

"Sto... stop," my voice came out in a weak whisper.

He stilled. His hand froze, and his eyes searched mine.

"You shouldn't," I said, forcing the words out. My voice trembled with nerves and fear. "Please..."

He looked at me. "Do you really think so?"

I nodded quickly.

“Ah... yes.” I intended to be sure, but my tone was more of a light, uneven breath.

The air between us hung thick. Then he just smiled.

“Have you ever said ‘no’ to anyone before?” he asked softly.

The question hit something deep. I didn’t need time to answer.

I shook my head. “No. I’m sorry, but...”

I tried to speak, but he cut me off gently, shushing me. His hand slowly retreated, and I blinked nervously.

His gaze was gentle, filled with care. A faint smile lingered on his lips, and before I could think further, I felt the warmth of his lips on my forehead. His arms wrapped around me, pulling me against his chest. My cheek rested on his heart, and I could feel the strength of his embrace cocooning me.

“Sometimes,” he said softly, “a simple ‘No’ is the best answer. It might hurt for a moment... but it can save so much pain.”

I inhaled deeply, but quiet regret was already curling inside me. I had never said ‘No’ before to anyone. I didn’t like it. My whole life, I had simply agreed. Whatever people wanted, whatever they expected of me... I gave in... all the time.

But the one person I never wanted to deny... felt glad that I did.

I didn’t know how to feel about that. A storm was rising within me, twisting from what had just happened. When I felt his fingers graze my hip, a sudden, cold terror ran through me. It hadn’t felt right, for the first time, it didn’t feel good. And yet... now that it was over, the panic was gone. All that remained was confusion.

What is wrong with me?

“I’m sorry, Hukum,” I whispered, burying my face deeper into his chest.

He chuckled softly and kissed the top of my head.

“I’m proud to be the first person who’s heard a ‘No’ from you,” he said warmly. “But you must understand, life isn’t about pleasing people. We all need limits, values, and self-respect. And we must never let a husband, father, sister, or anyone make us cross them. If your heart doesn’t say ‘Yes’ with full confidence... that’s where you stop and turn around.”

I didn’t understand it all. But I understood that he wasn’t angry when I stopped him. For the first time in my life, someone wasn’t disappointed by my resistance. For the first time, someone honoured it.

When my father arranged my marriage, no one had asked me anything. Not even what I wanted to wear. If I said ‘No’ to dinner, no one brought me food later. No one cared. My ‘No’ never mattered.

I think... ‘No’ is a small word. But its weight depends on the person it’s spoken to.

For some, it means nothing, like my family. Nobody ever heeded my opinion. If I denied something or showed dislike, my sisters would laugh at me. They would criticise me for having such taste, forcing me to like it. No matter how loudly I screamed, they would never hear me. For them, it was always a ‘Yes.’

For others, like Hukum, it was a line he would never cross. He stilled the moment I stopped him.

I imagined if someone like my father had been in his place. He would’ve told me, ‘Why don’t you like it? You should like it.’ And the weight of guilt and confusion would have crushed me into silence. I would’ve ended up agreeing again. Like always.

“Hukum,” I whispered.

“Hmm?” he responded calmly.

I clutched my dupatta tighter over my chest and asked, “So... if I don’t like any food, or clothes, or anything... can I just say no?” I kept my voice low; the question was already feeling like a mistake.

“Of course, Aishwarya,” he said without hesitation. “You don’t have to like everything. You’re allowed to dislike things, to refuse. Sometimes, saying no is not just okay, it’s joyful.”

I slowly pulled away and looked up at him. “Okay,” I whispered. “I’ll try.”

He smiled, lowering his gaze for a moment before lifting it again.

“And nothing bad will happen,” he said softly. “Only what you imagine inside your head happens outside. So make sure the good things live up there. I’ll get you another bottle of vermilion. Alright?”

I nodded. “Ji.”

He reached out and gently tucked a wet strand of hair behind my ear. “Now go change. I’m waiting for you outside. There’s something I want to tell you.”

I watched him step away and close the door behind him.

The moment he left, I exhaled deeply and turned to face the mirror again.

I looked horrible.

Quickly adjusting my dupatta, I picked up my blouse and slipped my arms through the sleeves, pulling it across my chest.

Damn, Moni isn’t here. Who’ll tie my strings?

I sighed. *Hukum will.*

I ignored the hesitation within me and changed into the dry skirt, tying it securely around my waist. Gathering the loose strings of the blouse behind my back, I walked toward the bedroom door, not forgetting to cover my head with the dupatta.

I opened the door and stepped inside.

“Hukum,” I called softly, spotting him near the almirah with a book in his hand. “Hukum,” I repeated, and this time he turned.

“Yes?”

I turned my back to him and said, ***“Humaari sahaayata kijiye na...”*** (Please help me.)

I heard his bare footsteps approach me, and a few moments later, I felt his fingers touch the strings of my blouse. He tied it carefully and perfectly.

I turned to face him, adjusting my dupatta, and tucked one end at my waist, draping the rest diagonally across my chest, tucking it at the back, as I usually did.

I no longer felt uncomfortable in front of him, not even without my dupatta.

He smiled at me, and I said softly, “Thank you, Hukum.”

That smile again. And just then, a sneeze left me, making me rub my nose.

He chuckled, and butterflies stirred inside my stomach. I didn’t know why, but every time his lips curved into a smile, something happened within me.

A death. Or maybe a birth.

A death for sure, because I could barely recognise parts of the old Aishwarya in me. She was fading, dissolving into some distant version of me I no longer reached for.

The one who used to run from him. The one who lowered her head around him. The one who would have spent the entire day inside the dressing room but never dared to ask him to tie her blouse strings. A slow death was happening to that Aishwarya. And in its place, a new one was being born.

“Aishwarya, there’s a letter for you,” he said, pulling me out of the fog of my thoughts.

“A letter?” I asked, confused, and he nodded. “Oh,” I just said.

“Do you want me to read it for you?” he offered.

I nodded, embarrassed. The heat of it ran through my veins; this shame of not being able to read my letter. But it was new to me. I had never received one before.

“Alright,” he said, and my full attention turned to him as he picked up the scroll from the low table and unrolled it.

"It's from your father," he said, and a tight knot formed in my stomach.

Father? My father... really?

"What does he have to say?" I asked in a low voice.

He began to read aloud:

Dear Daughter Aishwarya,

I really hope you are at peace and happy in your new home. This is to invite you and Prince Ranvijay Dev Singh to Songarh for the post-wedding rituals. All your sisters have also arrived in the Kingdom and are waiting for you to join them. Hope to hear from you soon.

Your Father,

****RoyalStamp****

Kingdom of Songarh

That was it.

Only a few lines.

But the mention of my sisters brought with it a long-forgotten ache. None of them had attended the wedding. Not because they couldn't, but because they didn't want to. And now, they were all waiting for me?

"Do you want to go?" I heard him ask.

I lifted my gaze to him. Did I want to go?

Strangely, I wasn't excited. I didn't know why. I had always said I loved my father... my sisters. They were still my family. They always would be.

I nodded slowly. "Ji... if my father has asked for it, then I should be there," I said quietly.

He stepped closer, and I swallowed hard as memories swirled like dust storms in my mind. My eyes blinked rapidly, trying to hold back the sting behind them.

"Okay. When should we leave?" he asked gently.

"Tomorrow, maybe," I whispered.

He nodded. "Alright. I should go. The court is about to begin."

I nodded and watched him leave.

The moment he stepped out, the tears finally rolled down my cheek silently.

I wiped them away quickly and looked around the chamber, trying to slow my breathing. First, the vermilion bottle had shattered. And then the letter.

I didn't know what was happening. But it didn't feel good. It felt very dark, heavy, and unpleasant.

I looked toward the door as the attendants entered to resume their daily tasks.

Moni smiled at me, but then her eyes widened in surprise, fixing on my neck.

"What happened to your neck?"

It took me a moment to understand what she meant.

The bruise.

And suddenly I remembered this was the same question I had asked Jiji that day. She had something similar on her neck, too, but hers was lighter, not as visible because of her brighter skin.

I furrowed my brow, unsure how to respond. "Hukum happened, I guess," I muttered quietly.

She giggled. "Congratulations!"

I blinked at her. "For what?"

"For the happening of Hukum," she said with a toothy grin. I frowned further, confused. "Did it hurt?" she asked, stepping closer.

How did she know?

"Yes," I said honestly.

"A lot?" she asked. "Was it rough... or very rough?" Her voice dropped slightly by the end.

I didn't know what to say. I didn't know if it was rough or very rough.

"Rough," I supposed.

She smiled. "Don't worry, it will get better with time."

I nodded, a little confused and quiet.

And then, suddenly, she asked, "And what about your pubic hair? Was he comfortable with that?"

Her words stopped me cold.

I blinked, stunned, and the embarrassment followed quickly, blooming in my cheeks.

What did she mean? Hukum had never said anything about it. But.....

.
.

Wait. Wait. Wait... wait... WAIT!!!

OH MY GOD.

My eyes widened with sudden realisation. My heart started racing as flashes of the moment replayed in my mind. His hand, his words, the way his fingers had dipped inside the waistband of my lehenga just before I stopped him.

Goosebumps burst across my arms and back.

Yes, he was about to touch me there. And he had said it... He wanted to see me. All of me. Naked.

Oh my god!

I could barely breathe. A full-body shiver rushed through me as the memory deepened. His voice echoed in my mind again and again.

"Let me see you, Aishwarya."

"I want to see how beautiful my wife is."

I looked up at Moni in sheer panic.

"Do you think... whatever happened... will happen again?" I asked slowly.

She thinned her brows for just a moment, then smirked.

"Of course. It can happen daily, day and night, even. An entire night. And with Hukum being strong and healthy... I wouldn't be surprised if it's more than that." Her voice was teasing and playful.

But all I could hear was: *He will ask again.*

I placed my hand on my chest; it was thudding so loudly I was sure she could hear it.

His words were still ringing in my ears like temple bells. *"I am your husband, and I want to see how beautiful my wife*

is."

"Moni..." I said breathlessly.

"Ji?"

I inhaled deeply, clutching at the edge of my dupatta. My voice dropped to a whisper. "I think... I need that sugar syrup. As soon as possible."

Because this time, I could feel it in my bones; I wouldn't be able to stop him.



14 Ranvijay

The day finally came to an end after a long court meeting. In just a week, the construction of the outskirts of the palace was going to begin, and I couldn't feel happier.

The designs, the workers, and the finances were all finalised.

My lucky Aishwarya.

I didn't know why, but somewhere deep inside, I felt like all the good things happening in my life were connected to her presence.

Maybe not. Actually yes!

After lunch with Bhai-sa and Agastya, I returned to my chamber in the evening. Agastya had been busy too, diving deep into numbers and logistics. He was managing the financial side of things with sharp focus. He'd always been a man with a single-minded dedication. He worked when it was time to work and played when it was time to play.

Dedicated, sharp, and very, very naughty. His mischief knew no bounds.

Sometimes, I wondered how he'd manage married life. The thought alone made me chuckle.

I stepped into the chamber and glanced around. "Aishwarya?" I called, but the bed was empty. So was the couch. Even the lamps hadn't been lit yet.

She must've gone to see Bhabhi-sa. I was happy to see her developing her own connections with the family.

And more than anything, I was still thinking about the way she had stopped me.

I had wanted her to.

She was a deeply submissive girl in every sense. And in that nature, sometimes people forget where their own boundaries lie. People like that... suffer quietly, endlessly. And I didn't want her to be one of them.

Finally, I was going to meet her family. See the world she came from. It would help me understand the root of those quiet flinches, the weight in her gaze, the way her voice trembled without reason.

The symptoms were obvious. They pointed to something in her past. Not physical, but emotional and mental pain. The kind of pain that reframes a person's perception. Their confidence. Their ability to reason or even recognise what they deserve.

I wanted to see who Aishwarya really was beyond her past; who she could have been, had she never been hurt?

A smile played on my lips as I heard the faint sound of anklets.

Hers.

They had a distinct sound altogether. I could pick them out in a crowd of a thousand.

I turned my gaze toward the bathroom just as she stepped out.

Her fingers rubbed her nose lightly, and her head was lowered, completely unaware of my presence. Her face was red, and her expression was a mystery as she tiptoed slowly.

That's strange. I swallowed. There was something off.

She was breathing softly, shakily sighing as she stepped across the chamber. The gentle sway of her waist as she walked gracefully, and then suddenly she paused and exhaled through her lips in a little puff.

I frowned. "What happened?"

She jolted at my voice, startled. Her shoulder hit the side table with a soft bang.

"Huh? Hukum—" she gasped, her eyes widened. Before I could speak again, she sneezed hard.

Oh, my goodness. My baby is sick.

A smile curved on my lips, and I moved toward her. Her eyes locked onto mine, nervously and a little scared, as though she were hiding something. As if something had happened.

“Are you okay, Aishwarya?”

She blinked at me blankly, then nodded too quickly. “Ah... yes. Absolutely fine. Nothing happened. Nothing hot or painful,” she blurted in a strange, rushed tone.

Something was wrong. “Okay... Have you had lunch? Dinner?”

“Y-Yes!” she replied immediately, then sneezed again.

And suddenly she let out a cry.

That soft cry. The wince. That wasn’t nothing.

“What happened?” I asked again, firmly. “Aishwarya, tell me.”

Her face straightened, brows drew into a faint line, and she shook her head. “Nothing. Everything is good,” she said, and smiled, but not genuinely.

As I took a step forward, she stepped back. “Hukum...” she whispered.

Her thighs pressed together, and she shifted her weight anxiously.

“What’s wrong, Aishwarya?” I asked softly, not moving.

She sucked in a breath and shook her head, this time slower. Her fingers gripped tightly on her lehenga.

I stepped closer and cupped her cheek. Her skin was warm. Her breathing was uneven and high.

“Hey... Look at me.”

She looked up hesitantly.

“What is it? Are you hurt? Did something happen? Is your stomach upset? Is your body aching?” I asked, trying to make sense of the discomfort she clearly wasn’t able to name.

Her gaze softened, perhaps at my concern, and then, faintly, she nodded.

“What is it?” I asked again, slowly, very carefully.

And then in the smallest, most breathless voice, she whispered, “It’s... burning. And aching.”

My brow drew together. “What is burning and aching?” I kept my voice low, not wanting to startle her again.

"Down... th-the... there," she whispered, barely audible.

I narrowed my brow. "Down where? What happened? Did someone touch you?"

She stammered. "M-Moni..."

"What?" My voice rose before I could stop it. "What the hell did she do?"

Aishwarya immediately began shaking her head in panic.

Anger surged through my chest.

"Moni!" I shouted. "Moni!!!"

"Hukum, Hukum—!" Aishwarya's trembling voice tried to stop me, and I looked at her. Her face was pale, frightened, and her hand clutched the hem of my kurta at the wrist.

Still, I didn't back down.

"Moni!!!"

"Ji, Hukum!" Moni came running in breathlessly.

I turned on her sharply. "What the hell did you do to her?"

Her eyes went wide. "Hukum, I... I didn't mean—"

"Hukum!" Aishwarya's voice broke again as she stepped forward.

My anger flared hotter. I looked back at Moni, my jaw clenched. "What did you do to her?"

Moni's eyes filled with terror. She folded her hands together in front of her. "Hukum... I... I swear—"

"Moni, leave," Aishwarya suddenly said, cutting me off.

"What?" I blinked at her in disbelief. Turning to Moni, I ordered, "And you, stay. Tell me what's going on?"

"I said leave," Aishwarya repeated, firmer this time.

I looked at Moni, who bowed quickly and left without another word. I stood still, stunned.

What the hell is going on between them?

"Hukum, it's nothing," Aishwarya tried, but I stepped closer and cupped her cheeks, searching her face.

"What is nothing?" I asked.

She dropped her gaze. Her fingers twisted into her skirt, and her whole body seemed to shrink with shame.

"It's just... just..." she fumbled, "...sugar... I mean, syrup... I kind of—"

"Don't blabber," I interrupted gently.

Her eyes squeezed shut, and she buried her face in my chest. "Moni... helped me... rem... remove the h...hair... down there," she mumbled, barely above a whisper.

I froze.

It took a few moments for her words to register fully. "Wh... what?"

For a solid few moments, I just stood there. Silent.

I didn't know whether I was supposed to laugh, cry, or leave the chamber entirely.

My hand rose to my mouth. Regret filled me for calling Moni.

"Oh!" I finally breathed.

She nodded, still hiding her face. "And it's kind of... burning..."

I exhaled slowly and stepped back. My thoughts were scrambled. I had no idea about it.

"But... why did you feel like you had to do that?" I asked, trying to keep my voice calm.

She looked up at me. "I thought... You wouldn't feel good... when you touch me next time."

My breath caught in my throat. I thought she wasn't aware of such things.

"Who told you that?" I asked gently.

"Moni said it would make you feel better," she replied softly.

"And how the hell does Moni know what would make me feel better?" I asked more of myself than of her.

She lowered her eyes. "You said... You wanted to see me. Naked."

And just like that, it all made sense.

I pinched the bridge of my nose and looked at her again. She was wearing one of her heavy embroidered lehengas.

No wonder it was burning.

"Wait," I muttered, walking over to her trunk. I rummaged through her clothes until I found a soft cotton nightgown. It was a two-piece outfit: a sleeveless dress that stopped a little above her knees, and a long overcoat.

I turned and walked back to her. "Change."

She blinked up at me, confused.

"But, Huk—"

"Change, Aishwarya," I repeated, this time with more firmness.

Her fingers trembled as she took the fabric from my hands. "...Okay," she murmured, and turned away.

I closed my eyes the moment she left the room.

Damn it.

I walked to the couch and sat down, scanning the papers in front of me without reading a word.

My hand dragged down my face.

She went through all that stingy pain... just to make me feel good about her body.

Her body. Her own body. She thought she had to fix it to please me.

God...

No one had told her it was her body to feel good. Not mine to approve of.

She needed to feel right in her own skin, without shame, without fear, without needing to be what someone else wanted her to be.

Especially me.

I exhaled heavily, trying to calm the tightness in my chest, and sank onto the couch, closing my eyes for a moment.

Why, Aishwarya?

I couldn't even be angry with her, not when she looked at me like that.

Why did you have to be so painfully sweet, so innocent, so heartbreakingly unaware of how you affect me?

I heard the soft, familiar chime of her anklets nearing from the corner of the room, and lazily opened my eyes.

She stood there in the soft cotton nightgown, nervously fisting the lace over her chest. Her eyes were hesitant as they found mine.

"Is it comfortable?" I asked gently.

She gave a shy nod. "Ji."

I wet my lips and nodded once. "Alright... you should rest. I need to check on tomorrow's departure preparations."

She nodded again, and I stepped out quietly.

The courtyard was humming with quiet activity. Attendants were moving quickly, organising gifts, securing belongings, checking wheels and saddles. This would be my first visit to Songarh; I couldn't go empty-handed.

Everything needed to be perfect.

By the time I returned to my chamber, the night had deepened. Only a few oil lamps flickered low, casting warm, soft shadows across the room. I pulled off my kurta and walked into the bedroom.

The faint sound of her bangles brushing together reached my ears. She was still awake.

"Aishwarya," I called softly, heading toward the table for water.

"Ji," she replied, just as softly.

I smiled faintly at her voice. "Are you okay?"

"Ji."

I drank the water, set the glass back, and turned to the bed.

She was already lying there, watching me timidly.

I climbed in beside her, and without hesitation, she shifted to rest her head on my chest, curling her arms around me.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I didn't mean to anger you."

I took a breath, holding her close. "I'm not angry. But it hurt me that you had to go through pain for something like that."

She lifted her face slightly, and a few strands of hair fell along her cheek. I reached up and gently tucked them behind her ear.

“Moni said it’ll ease up soon,” she muttered.

“I hate Moni,” I mumbled under my breath, closing my eyes.

A quiet giggle almost escaped her, but then she asked gently, **“Aap so rahein hain?”** (Are you sleeping?)

I hummed, **“Hmm... kal praatahkaal sheegra uthna hai.”** (We have to wake up early tomorrow.)

Silence followed for a few heartbeats until her voice broke through again.

“Sunie...” (Listen...) Her tone was so soft, so innocently sultry, that a smile appeared on my lips without effort.

“Ji, kahiye,” (Yes, tell me.) I said, opening my eyes to look at her.

She blinked up at me. “Why did you want to see me... naked?”

My breath caught momentarily.

I stared at her.

Then slowly I exhaled and murmured, “Okay, Aishwarya... you have two options. Either you fall asleep right now...” I leaned a little closer, my voice dipping low and teasing. “... or we kiss until I fall asleep.”



15 Aishwarya

A knot formed deep in my stomach. I inhaled slowly and lifted my face, bracing myself on one hand against the mattress while the other gently rested over his midriff for support. The loose strands of my braid swung across my cheek as I gazed down at him. My heart fluttered wildly.

“Humein neend nahi aa rahi, Hukum.” (I’m not feeling sleepy, Hukum.) I whispered the words, barely trusting my voice.

He inhaled sharply through his nose, his chest rising heavily beneath my palm.

I didn’t know why, but the thought of meeting my sisters the next day stirred unease inside me. It always had. Guests, relatives, and extended family had a strange way of making me feel small, anxious, and invisible.

I saw his eyes watching me drowsily. One of his arms was tucked under his head, and the curve of his arm peeked beneath the fabric. I caught myself drawing slow, nervous circles on his midriff.

He was clearly tired. I could see that his eyelids were threatening to close completely.

Suddenly, a hard sneeze left me again, and a chill brushed over my skin like a whisper.

“Come here,” he said gently, reaching out and curling his fingers around my forearm, pulling me toward him.

He turned onto his side, and I mirrored the movement. We lay face to face, only inches apart. His hand found my waist and tugged me closer until I could feel his warmth soak into mine.

“Let’s treat your cold first.”

I sucked in a breath as I felt his hand slide between us, reaching for the strings of the overcoat I wore. Panic tickled

my spine at the sudden rush of sensation, the fear that he might undress me again danced around my thoughts.

I was practically naked underneath this. The thin fabric was doing no justice in covering my body.

"Hukum..." My voice was hesitant as I glanced down at his hand.

But he hushed me, gently pulling down the arms of the overcoat, revealing my bare skin beneath. A wave of heat flushed through me as I dropped my gaze, overcome by timidity, by the sheer exposure of this moment.

My nipples perked against the thin cotton of the nightgown, and I knew from the way his gaze dipped that he had noticed. Nothing could have made me feel more vulnerable... or more alive.

He pulled the comforter up to my shoulders at once, wrapping me in warmth, and leaned in, impossibly closer.

"Do you want to know how I want to sleep with you for the rest of our lives?" he probed softly, and my heart skipped a beat.

The rest of our lives.

Four words... just four simple words, and yet they landed in me with more gravity than even the sacred seven rounds around the fire. More than a promise, they felt like eternity etched into a sentence.

"How?" I whispered.

He reached around and slipped his hand into the small of my back, pulling me tightly against him. I felt our stomachs press together, but I knew, with my head at his chest height, that my torso was aligned with his waist.

The curse of being shorter, I thought absently.

Our foreheads touched, and I closed my eyes.

He gently guided my arm to wrap around his torso, and the space between us vanished.

When I opened my eyes, I was met with his warmth. His presence had consumed every inch of mine.

His hand travelled to the back of my thigh. His warm palm against my bare skin ignited a spark that raced up my spine, like fire meeting frost.

A deep breath escaped me. "Hukum..."

He slowly pulled my thigh over the side of his hip, binding us in an exposed embrace under the blanket, and with that, the last thread of distance disappeared into heat and closeness.

His hand travelled up my back until it cupped the nape of my neck with quiet reverence. My nose brushed his, and his leg slipped between mine, causing my heart to pulsate uncontrollably.

"Are you comfortable, Aishwarya?" he asked softly, with such sincerity that I blinked, trying to steady my thoughts.

The weight of his body, his breath against my lips, his warmth under the covers... It took a good few moments to calm myself.

I nodded. "Ji." The word trembled out of me, barely there, as a smile tugged at his lips. He nuzzled his nose against mine in a tender gesture that made me melt entirely into him.

Then, in a sleepy, affectionate voice, he whispered, "You still haven't answered my question. Are you going to fall asleep... or kiss?"

My lips parted as I could barely breathe, let alone think.

"I don't think I'll... be able to sleep in such close... proximity," I stammered.

He chuckled softly.

"Then... It's a kiss." He said in that deep, husky voice, and before I could even process the weight of his words, his lips crashed against mine.

The kiss wasn't violent, but it was immediate. Powerful enough to capture both of my lips in his hold, pulling them into a slow and intense sucking that stole my breath. His mouth moved against mine firmly, and every stroke was commanding, leaving me breathless.

“Hukum,” I breathed into his mouth, my body stretching against his as though I needed more contact. The sound of my anklet bells softly chiming reached my ears, but my mind was already dizzy.

I pulled back, gasping slightly. His eyes opened lazily, heavy with sleep and something else.

“How am I supposed to sleep like this? It’s making me feel... sick,” I whispered, my voice cracking under the confusion of feelings brewing inside me.

He smiled faintly. “You’ll get used to it,” he spoke in a quiet voice, and I didn’t know why, but the way our bodies were entwined, our legs intertwined, our arms wrapped around each other, I felt unbearably shy.

I was achingly wet, and my core throbbed for reasons unknown to me.

I bit my lip. *Oh my God.*

As my hand fisted against his bare back instinctively, the cool glass bangles clinked softly against his skin.

He then leaned in and pressed a soft kiss to my forehead.

I stayed still as his touch was so reverent yet gentle, leaving me numb.

Slowly, his hand slid down from my back to the curve of my thigh, still draped over his hip. He cupped my foot in his warm palm and rubbed his fingers along my toes and toe rings.

It tickled, but it calmed me too. I breathed in deeply and let myself sink into him, fluttering my eyes shut.

His thumb kept moving, brushing soft circles over my toes, and sleep tiptoed closer and closer.

I blinked my eyes open for a moment, stealing a glimpse of him. His face was relaxed in sleep, and as I saw strands of hair falling on his forehead, I couldn’t resist reaching out and gently sweeping them aside.

His thumb had stopped moving. He was finally drifting off.

I think I was beginning to like him. Not just liking, but falling deep into something I couldn’t pull away from.

The fear I had felt that first day... it was fading.

I shifted closer, smiled faintly, and pressed a soft kiss to his lips.

And finally, I too... drifted into sleep.



I woke up with a long, deep breath.

My arms stretched lazily across the bed, and I felt something heavy resting on me. My lashes blinked open slowly, struggling against the morning light and the blur of sleep.

It took me a moment to register the weight.

I was lying flat on my back. The comforter had slipped off. And half of his body was draped over me.

His warm breath tickled the hollow of my neck. His face was tucked against the crook of my shoulder, and his chin rested just above my collarbone. One arm was sprawled across my midriff, and his biceps were pressed softly into the curve of my breast.

His knee was still caught between mine, and one of my legs had slipped between his, as well.

I exhaled slowly and turned onto my side, curling closer into him, cocooned in the warmth of his embrace.

He stirred in his sleep, inhaling deeply, and I realised there was no pain down there, nor any stinginess.

I buried my face in his neck and breathed him in; his faded cologne and something unique about him were so intoxicating.

My lips grazed his shoulder, and my fingers reached up, tangling in his hair.

And then... something twitched between us.

I blinked, confused. My brows drew together as I lowered my hand between our bodies and touched something hard and thick.

I gently rubbed the strange object, trying to find out what it was. And suddenly, he inhaled sharply.

Wait... Is that...? My eyes widened.

Was there a scroll in his kurta's pocket?



16 Ranvijay

I was playing with fire.

A fire so naïve, it was unaware of its own power and the destruction it could cause. A fire so desperate to touch the sky. A fire hidden beneath the hard shell of wood, concealed from people's eyes, as if that hard, dark brown wood, almost equivalent to waste, held the power to set the world ablaze with just a spark. Just the mere touch of a spark.

Boom.

And Aishwarya was that fire.

She was a soft plant, slowly growing into a tree, unaware of her potential, her power, and the destruction she could cause once she became that tree.

She was hidden with an immense treasure in the form of talent.

She was the wood that held fire beneath layers of societal judgment, innocence, shame, and thousands of other things women had been told again and again over the centuries, until the saying became an eternal truth.

Well, that was the benefit of death and a limited lifespan. Whether good or bad, no man could hold knowledge forever. Every lesson, every truth, every experience must be passed on to successors. And with every new mind, the knowledge moulds, shifts, and becomes something else. And sometimes, evil wins over good because no good has survived long enough to protect its truth.

And Aishwarya was a victim of that.

A victim of knowledge that had no hard facts, no roots, only echoes passed from mouth to mouth until those lies became her life. Until they became her air. Her food. Until she became those lies.

In my arms, she was searching for escape. An escape from those lies. From that supposed eternal truth. From the

knowledge she'd been force-fed until she believed in it.

And never in my life had I wanted something as badly as I wanted to take every piece of that false knowledge out of her. To strip her back to the seed. The beginning.

A seed yet free to grow, free to follow the sun, to choose its climate, to drink its own water, and bloom on its own terms. A seed with the right to choose.

I wanted to extract the shame, the doubts, the innocence that was forced, the fear that wasn't hers, from her. All I wanted was for her to love herself the way she loved her family. The way she was beginning to love me.

I wanted to divert that love from me to her.

Her eyes were closed. She was light in my arms. Dangerously beautiful.

When the heat had started to build between us, she had thrown the comforter away, and my eyes were instantly drawn to her curves. She was fine and delicate. The hem of her nightgown ended just slightly below her hips, barely covering her slim, smooth thighs.

She was extremely soft.

I inhaled a deep breath as my sleep was broken in the middle of the night when she threw the comforter off. I woke to check on her, but she seemed fine. My nose caught her natural, beautiful scent at the curve of her neck, and I drifted back to sleep almost immediately.

Then something woke me again.

Her soft hands were around my swollen, erect manhood.

It felt like I had been yanked out of a deep sleep. She shifted slightly beside me, and her grip tightened on me.

Oh, what is my baby doing to me?

"Aishwarya," a breath escaped my lips, and I instinctively reached down to move her hand away.

"Why are you sleeping with a scroll?" I heard her sweet voice ask in a sleepy tone. "It's hurting me a little and making me uncomfortable."

A small smile appeared on my face. My baby was bold in my dream.

As I sensed her ear was close to my lips, I whispered, "It is not a scroll, Aishwarya."

"What is it then?" she asked, and once again, her hand touched me.

A strong shiver ran down my spine. And then it hit me. This wasn't a dream.

Damn it! *Fuck me.*

My erection grew even harder with her touch. It was throbbing. Aching. What the hell had she done to me?

Oh, my goodness.

She stroked it slightly. I was paralysed. This was it. I was dead.

"Oh, my baby, do not touch me like this," the words escaped helplessly. And yet, her fingers tightened around me.

I wanted her to stop, but my body betrayed me. I was on the verge of exploding, so fucking close. Her mere touch was enough.

Oh, my God.

"It is huge... it must be a scroll cover then? But why are you sleeping with it? Let me take it out," she said. She actually said that.

I wanted to get up and run, but I was frozen. I was enslaved, trapped in the moment, on the edge of release.

"Fuck." The throbbing intensified. I was losing control.

I immediately grabbed her wrist and twisted her hand away from me, earning a startled gasp from her.

Hot thickness leaked from me as I closed my eyes in pure shame. Why? When did I become like this? One touch and I was done.

What the hell was she doing to me? Was it her innocence? Was that what was driving me mad?

Why?

Whyyyy?

Whhhhhhyyyyyyyyyy?

I pressed my lips to her skin to muffle the sound of my heavy breathing. I was panting hard until more leaked out of me.

It was too much. The ache was too much. I had to use my hands. If I didn't, it would only hurt worse.

"Hukum, are you okay?" Her sweet voice reached my ears.

And it made everything even worse.

All I wanted in that moment was to slide her inner up, make my way in her, sink deep inside, and take her relentlessly, until every last drop of me was claimed.

I shut my eyes tight. "Yes, yes... Aishwarya," I tried to say and continued, "You should go and get ready."

However, the reality was that I couldn't do any of this. My hand fisted the bedsheet to control myself, to control my panting, and to calm down.

"Hukum, are you hurt? Should I call someone for help?" she asked in her soft and sweet voice, and I just wanted to run. But I tried to control it.

"I am okay, Aishwarya, I promise," I said, keeping my distance from her.

"Go inside," I ordered firmly, while she looked confused and hurt.

Please, baby, please. Not now. Please leave me alone right now. Please. I don't want to hurt you.

I cursed myself for this. I always... I immediately grabbed the comforter and hid myself beneath it. It was still dark. She wouldn't be able to see much of me.

I heard the soft chime of her anklets and the clink of her bangles marking each step as she walked off.

I sighed with relief and threw the comforter away. Seeing her disappear into the bathroom, guilt consumed me.

I hurt her. Why the hell could I not control myself?

But she was beginning to be my weakness. Her eyes, her lips, her neck, her curves—her everything was becoming my

weakness.

Just the way she softly called me Hukum could bring me to my knees. I was becoming a puppy.

“Urgh...” My erection stiffened at the thought of her.

Fine!

Finally alone, I slipped my hand beneath the fabric, wrapping around the aching, hard erection that had been pressing against my restraint. My fingers moved slowly, stroking upward, then down, chasing the relief my body so desperately craved.

But it didn't feel the same as her touch. For goodness's sake, I wasn't liking my own touch.

Yet I tried... I tried faster, but it only hurt me. My arousal faded, and I withdrew my hand, groaning.

I was completely wrecked.

“Urghh... I hate you, Aishwarya.”

Fact. I couldn't. My own touch felt foreign and unsatisfying. I squeezed my eyes shut and let out a deep, frustrated groan.

This was unbearable. Dying would be easier than living with this longing. Begging might've helped if she had understood. But our case was different.

It seemed I'd have to wait... wait for her to touch me. Only then.. only then would I finally be at peace.

How was I supposed to live like this? Half-undone. Always waiting. Trapped in this ache until my wife would grace me with her touch and offer me release.

I'll lose my mind like this. Completely.

I remained on the bed until I heard the soft jingle of her anklets marking her presence as she finished her morning routine.

A while later, the sound of her footsteps faded into the dressing room. Only then did I rise.

I stepped into the bathroom and took a long bath, washing away the mess I had made.

Once I was done, I wrapped a cotton towel around my waist and moved toward the dressing room.

I pushed the door open and saw her startle, like she always did, and she banged into the table behind her, one hand instinctively fixing over her blouse.

I inhaled deeply and stepped closer. She looked upset. Her gaze dropped, and she turned back toward the mirror. Her fingers struggled with the blouse strings, and I reached out to help.

"I'm sorry, Aishwarya," I said in a quiet voice.

She didn't respond, just kept her eyes down.

I finished tying the strings at her back, and she drew in a long breath.

"Thank you, Hukum," she whispered, and I could tell she was angry.

I stepped back, letting my eyes rest on her. She looked breathtaking in deep maroon. The rich hue complemented her skin, and the lehenga clung low on her waist.

Only then did I realise she'd gotten herself cleaned, dressed... just for me to touch.

That single thought sent a rush of heat through me. I stepped back and sank into the chair near the dressing table, trying to regain control.

Her eyes met mine through the mirror, and she drew a steady breath.

"Are you okay?" she asked softly, slipping one earring into place.

Even in anger, she cared. And I adored that about her.

I nodded. "Yes."

A lie. I was far from okay. My hard-on ached, and the frustration clawed at me. My body had denied touch and had failed to offer release. The craving for my wife's touch was unbearable.

She nodded faintly and picked up the second earring, and I just kept staring at her.

She said nothing and reached up to her damp bun, releasing her long, wavy curls with a fluid motion. The strands cascaded down her back, flowing past her spine and even her hips like silk unspooling.

I inhaled sharply.

The image of fisting her hair in my hand and pushing her up against the table, burying myself inside her, flashed through my mind like fire through dry grass.

Damn it, Ranvijay. Get a grip.

I palmed my face, arching my head back with a groan. "Urghh..."

"Hukum, are you okay?" she asked, her concern clear as she gently placed her hand on my shoulder.

I opened my eyes and found her looking at me with worry shadowing her face. A loose strand of hair danced beside her cheek, and I somehow managed a nod.

"Yes, I'm okay," I lied with a faint smile.

"You look unwell," she said gently.

I shook my head. "No, I'm perfectly fine. Happy." I didn't know why I was rambling; her presence was unravelling me.

She nodded and turned back to the mirror. I saw her fingers move uncertainly through her damp hair, and her gaze flickered toward mine through the reflection.

And there I sat, barely dressed, wrapped in a towel, silently watching her and waiting for her to finish.

Finish me first, Baby.

She picked up the thin waist chain and encircled it around her waist, struggling slightly with the clasp.

"Let me help," I offered.

She turned, and I leaned in, taking the chain ends in my hands. My eyes couldn't help but linger on her exposed waist, her soft midriff, her gentle curves, her small, perfect navel.

God, I wanted to kiss her belly. To grip her waist with both hands and hold her.

But I swallowed hard, forcing focus as my fingers fumbled with the tiny clasp.

I leaned closer, feeling frustration mounting at the stubborn lock, and instinctively grazed my teeth lightly against it. She shivered.

"Thank you," she whispered.

Without thinking, I pressed my lips softly to her belly. *Someday... my child will be there.*

"You're beautiful, Aishwarya," I murmured.

Her eyes found mine, turning shy. And then, with trembling fingers, she reached out to push back the damp strands from my forehead.

"Are you sure you're alright, Hukum?" she asked gently, voice thick with worry. "You haven't seemed well since morning."

I felt the tension in her touch. She was probably genuinely worried about me.

The vermilion. Then the awkwardness in the morning. And just then, it hit me.

Shit. I forgot the vermilion bottle.



17 Aishwarya

Hukum's condition was worrying me. I didn't know why, but something didn't feel right. Not with everything that had happened. First, the broken vermilion bottle, and then this sudden shift in him. It was as if a heavyweight were resting on both our chests.

My fingers moved slowly through his thick, soft hair as he gently pressed his forehead against my midriff. A shiver ran down my spine, and I shifted slightly on my feet.

My voice was a mere whisper as I softly called out, "Hukum."

"Hmm?" He hummed against my skin. His deep, warm breath kept fanning across me, making me shudder.

"I know if I ask, 'What's wrong?'... You'll say, 'Everything's okay, Aishwarya. Everything's good.' But if our roles were reversed, you wouldn't accept that answer from me," My heart was pounding as the words rolled off my tongue with hesitation but honesty. "You'd dig deeper. You'd pick up the whole world if you had to, just to find out what was bothering me... So please, let me do the same. Maybe I can't fix it, but I deserve to know. At least I should know what is bothering you."

He inhaled deeply against my skin, staying silent for a moment. Then, in a low, pained voice, he said, "The problem is... you're very young, Aishwarya. And I'm afraid I'll end up hurting you."

I closed my eyes for a moment, swallowing hard.

"All my life, people have told me I don't understand things," I murmured. "My sisters used to say I don't understand clothes, gossip, or politics. My father... always said I didn't understand anything at all. And now you're saying the same thing that I won't understand. That I'll only

get hurt..." I trailed off, my voice softening with each word. "Maybe the problem really is in me."

He shook his head immediately. "That's not what I meant. Aishwarya, that's not it," he said, straightening slightly to meet my gaze. His voice was low and apologetic. "Actually... I'm really, really sorry. I forgot to bring you another bottle of vermilion." His eyes searched mine.

Just looking at his face made a smile break across my lips. "It's okay," I said. "I collected the scattered vermilion. I'll use that."

He gulped visibly, tensed. "Are you sure?"

I nodded. "Yes. And... what about your health?"

He stood up from the chair, and my breath caught in my throat. His tall, bare body blocked everything else from my view, and droplets of water still dripped down from his freshly bathed hair to his chest and forehead.

He smelled of bath oil and freshness.

My mouth ran dry as he stepped closer. His gaze stayed low, almost shy, as if he couldn't meet my eyes. Then, his lips touched my hairline in a soft kiss, and his hand gently clasped my forearm.

Slowly, he brought my hands to his stomach, and I could feel how tight his body was. There were deep lines carved into his abdomen, and my fingers slipped into them unknowingly, tracing the edges with wonder.

"I'm craving your touch, Aishwarya. It's like... my calmness, my peace... depends on it." His voice made my cheeks flush with heat.

The space between us suddenly felt too small. The air felt too heavy. My knees began to weaken beneath me as my heartbeat thudded louder.

"Then I'll touch you until you feel at peace," I whispered, catching my breath, stepping closer. Our feet touched, and my toe rested lightly over his.

"But I don't want to use—"

"You're not using me," I interrupted firmly. "This is my choice. My will." My eyes were drawn to his midriff again. To the carved planes of his chest and stomach. "How did you get these lines, Hukum?"

"Exercise," he answered, breathing slightly heavier.

My fingers trembled lightly as they continued to touch him. I could hear the faint sound of my bangles brushing against his skin.

"You don't have—"

"I want to," I cut him off again, raising my eyes to his. He blinked slowly, locking his gaze with mine.

"Where should I touch you?" I asked, my voice barely audible, shaking slightly with nerves.

He lowered his gaze. "A little... lower," he said, and I could hear the huskiness weaving into his voice.

As I glanced down again, my breath slowed... and there, beneath the thick layer of his towel, I noticed something long and heavy outlined.

My brows furrowed instinctively.

Scroll?

The towel had no pockets... and I hadn't seen it before. So it wasn't a scroll.

I blinked, feeling my nerves stirring wildly inside me. And still... I asked in a slow, timid whisper, "Shall I take it off?"

My cheeks were burning, my breath fell shallow, but nothing, not even the fluttering panic in my chest, was strong enough to overpower the curiosity swimming through me.

He was standing in just a towel before me, and if I removed it, he'd be naked. It wasn't as if I had never seen anyone naked before. I had seen my sisters' children without clothes, but they were only around two years old. They would often ask me to bathe their sons.

But Hukum wasn't two years old.

He was a twenty-five-year-old, taller, bigger, heavier, and certainly a lot more powerful than me, man.

Unknowingly, my thoughts went back to that two-year-old boy and then to Hukum. My brain, without permission, began comparing the size of their fingers. One inch and then three inches. Then the size of the baby's nakedness... and Hukum's naked...

My eyes widened slightly. I gulped nervously as several things began making sense, hidden beneath layers. My trembling fingers reached slowly for the edge of his towel.

His palms lingered on my forehead, gently cradling it, not pushing, just sitting there... with care and warmth.

I unhooked the edge of the cotton towel tucked at his waist, and it began to loosen with the softest resistance.

My chest moved up and down as my heart thumped rapidly, each beat growing in intensity over the previous.

The towel slipped lower, and my gaze unintentionally caught sight of the not-the-scroll, hard thing.

A sharp breath escaped my lips, and my knees weakened at the sight of it.

I blinked rapidly, forgetting how to breathe as a flush of heat spread across my face.

I could hear the heaviness of his breath as he leaned in and pressed a kiss to my forehead.

With uneven breaths, I slowly slid my trembling fingers along his lower abdomen... carefully avoiding it.

I sucked on my lower lip, feeling my throat suddenly dry, and noticed the towel pool around our feet.

"Sh... should... I touch t-this?" The words tumbled out of my mouth hesitantly.

He brushed his lips lightly along the side of my forehead. "Please..." His voice was no louder than a whisper.

I felt him shift closer, and another kiss landed gently on my skin. My back brushed the edge of the table, and I blinked breathlessly, standing utterly still.

My heart flipped as I reached out with shivering fingers; the second I lightly touched him, he visibly reacted with a shudder, and a jolt of electricity coursed through me.

It was the same kind of sensation I felt when he touched me.

Heat bloomed beneath my skin, crawling up to my cheeks as wave after wave of sensation washed over me. And somewhere within, I found myself quietly liking that I could make him feel this way.

"More?" I whispered.

He nodded. "Yes. Take it in your hand, Aishwarya," he husked out.

I moved carefully, trying to wrap my fingers around it, but I could barely manage to do so. My hand felt too small. It was thick, solid, and hard like bone, yet warm beneath my touch. And there were veins.

"Like this?" I asked in a barely audible voice.

"Yes," he breathed.

I felt it pulse, and a faint tremble passed through his body under my hold. A glistening drop formed at the tip, and I swallowed hard, deeply affected by the sight.

"Does it hurt, Hukum?" I asked, concerned.

He shook his head slowly. "No... it feels good," he exhaled.

I didn't know how long I was supposed to hold it. It was hot, two shades darker than the rest of him, and though strong, it felt sensitive, as though it responded to the slightest shift in my hand.

"Now?" I asked again, unsure.

He leaned in and kissed the side of my forehead. The touch tilted my head slightly, and warmth surged up my cheeks like a rush of fire. I closed my eyes, gently biting my lower lip to steady the breathy sounds leaving me.

"Rub it," he said.

I blinked, confused. "Rub?"

Before I could ask more, his hand slid down my arm and covered mine. With quiet confidence, he guided my fingers around him, shaping my grip.

"Like this," he murmured, moving my hand up and down slowly, yet firmly.

“Oh,” I gasped softly. “Does it feel good?”

“Incredible,” he breathed, his voice thick with sensation. Slowly, he loosened his grip, letting his hand fall away, leaving me full in control.

I kept stroking him gently. I could hear his breath growing erratic. His body trembled slightly, his chest rose and fell in sharp, uneven motions.

“Argh...” A guttural cry broke from his lips, which sent a powerful shiver coursing down my spine.

My knees faltered, my stomach twisted, and my heart pounded as if trying to tear its way out. My core grew unbearably wet, and I felt the slick heat slipping down the inside of my thigh.

I closed my eyes, overwhelmed by the sensations. The soft clinking of my bangles rang louder, echoing with the rhythm of my strokes.

“Are you okay?” I whispered, barely able to find my voice.

He turned his face and pressed a kiss to my cheek. “Oh... yes. Yes, baby.”

My heart skipped at the way he said it.

What’s happening to us?

Why did it feel like something only we could know... like a secret too dirty to speak of aloud?

I felt incredibly timid.

“A little more,” he murmured, his voice broken and heavy with desperation.

I obeyed, letting my hand move.

“Oh, Aishwarya,”

I felt his fingers trembling around my forearm and noticed how his stomach shifted suddenly.

“Stop... st-op.... stop,” He took a hurried step away from me, leaning back into the chair. He grabbed the towel and pressed it down immediately.

He was breathing heavily, and his head slumped against the chair. He let out a large breath, finding it hard to catch his breath.

He cried out in a whisper, and I felt my heart about to explode. It was dangerous.

I was about to slip, losing my balance, but I abruptly steadied myself against the edge of the table. Sweat beads formed on my forehead, and I pressed my thighs together, feeling an unmistakable wetness there.

My eyes shut tightly for a few moments as I tried to catch my breath, listening to his panting echo through the air.

Why was I feeling this way? It was scary... yet exciting.

The silence followed, stretching long until the wild noise of his breathing slowly faded into the air. I looked at him.

His eyes were still closed, and he had turned red. His neck stretched from the tilt of his head against the chair, and I saw him swallow hard, his Adam's apple moving visibly. It twisted something inside my stomach.

I couldn't say anything. I just watched as his face seemed to glow, and suddenly, I was the one feeling terribly sick.

My brain wasn't processing anything. I turned to face the mirror.

Was he happy or sad? Was I happy or sad? Or maybe... this wasn't about being happy or sad. Or maybe it was too soon to weigh things in terms of happiness or sadness at all.

I looked at myself in the mirror and noticed my perked nipples, poking painfully through the fabric.

I could still remember the touch of his hand on my chest... when he had pressed it hard against me. It was hot. And different. But it felt good.

And... I felt something almost exactly like what I had felt that night.

"Hukum, are you okay?" I asked in a slow voice, glancing at him through the mirror.

He nodded slightly, and I could see his body slowly easing.

Was he falling asleep? I doubted it, but the moment felt too full to ask.

A slight smile appeared on my lips as I looked down at my hand.

He was craving my touch. That's why he was feeling awkward and behaving that way in bed. And he was too shy to ask me to touch him.

But... why my touch?

Maybe because I was his wife, and he would feel ashamed to ask anyone else.

I took a deep breath and looked at myself in the mirror.

He had fallen asleep in no time, and I tried to concentrate on getting ready, wearing all my jewellery. I braided my hair and sighed once I was done.

My eyes fell on his sleeping figure, and my lips curved into the slightest of smiles.

He seemed at peace.

The sensations that had built up inside me had faded away, but there was a throbbing burn in my core, perhaps from the hair removal or because of what had happened earlier.

But it wasn't menstruation. I had checked a thousand times.

And I felt this way every time we came close and something happened between us.

Strangely, it felt good, and a little crazy.

I walked toward his trunk to take out his clothes for the day. After picking a white kurta and lower garment, with a contrasting maroon overcoat, a coordinating shawl and turban as well, I sorted out his rings and ornaments.

As the bright rays of the sun streamed into the room, he visibly stiffened at its invasion.

"Hukum," I called softly, but he didn't move an inch. "Hukum," I called again, louder.

He sucked in a deep breath, stretching his hand toward me lazily.

I moved mine toward his, confused.

Holding my hand, he pulled me closer, settling me on his lap, and wrapped his arm around my waist.

I lowered my gaze to his abdomen, still covered with the towel.

It wasn't hard or long anymore. *Where did it go?*

I gulped. It was strange.

I saw him opening his eyes lazily. "Thank you, Aishwarya," he murmured, leaning in, cradling my cheek in a warm hold.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

He nodded and kissed my cheek. "Yes, more than okay. Thank you so much," he whispered, placing another kiss.

"I didn't mean you don't understand, Aishwarya. To be honest, you're the most understanding person I've ever met. You're so beautiful," he said, and a strong shiver ran down my spine.

"You think?" I asked immediately, considering the way I looked.

He nodded lazily. "I do," he muttered huskily and kissed me again.

Was he half-asleep? Was he joking? I certainly wasn't beautiful. I never was.

I chuckled, and he lifted his gaze to look at me. "You don't trust me, do you?" he asked, pulling me into a loose, warm hug. He pressed a soft kiss just below my ear, sending a wave of light sensations through my nerves. "Someday you'll know that I don't lie," he said huskily, and I giggled, feeling ticklish.

"Hukum, you should get ready or we'll be late," I said, and he lazily pulled back, resting his back against the chair.

As I stood up, his intent gaze fixed on my every move. He scanned me from head to toe in the mirror, making me feel slightly self-conscious about how I looked. My slim waist and frail arms were clad in a maroon attire and heavy gold jewellery.

When our eyes met in the mirror, I took a sharp breath, feeling incredibly timid.

The image of his bare torso, those sculpted muscles, his puffed-out chest, and his intense, heavy breathing was constantly on my mind.

In that moment, it felt as if his entire being depended on it. It was as if he had surrendered all sense, caring neither for his nakedness nor for anything else in the world. All that mattered to him was that touch... those strokes, like a desperate, burning need for a massage to it.

I gulped at the thought and lowered my gaze. "Umm, Hukum, I should wait for you outside," I murmured, sucking in my lower lip. "You should get ready,"

I was about to take a step forward to leave, but before I could, he held my hand.

My heart raced as I turned to look at him.

"You've seen enough. You don't have to leave," he spoke in a soft voice, sounding as though he was a little shy.

I nodded nervously. "Ji."

He rose from the chair and wrapped the towel around his waist.

I looked up at him. The sunlight falling on his shoulder made my cheeks flush hot, and suddenly, my gaze fell on a faint scratch on his skin.

I looked down at my nails. *I should cut them.*

"What happened?" he asked, and I quickly lifted my gaze, hiding my nails in a fist.

"Nothing, nothing, all good."

I tried to speak but paused as I saw him slipping the kurta on. My eyes widened at how striking he looked in white.

As he tied the knots of his kurta over his chest, he said, "Thank you so much for picking out my clothes. But you don't—"

"I know I don't have to. I know you can do it. But please... doing it won't harm me," I cut him off, and he chuckled.

“Ah, humaara baccha bolne lag gaya hai,” (Oh, my baby has started talking now.)

I laughed, feeling heat rise in my cheeks. “So, what are your sisters like?” he asked, sliding his arms into his overcoat.

I stood up from the chair. “Like women,” I replied.

He suddenly chuckled, and I didn’t know why, but the air between us felt lighter.

I held the overcoat, smoothing it while his fingers worked at the cuff. My gaze slipped to his neck; I gulped and lowered my eyes to the strings of his coat.

“You know that’s not what I meant. I mean, are they rich, intelligent, or what?” he asked, and I focused on tying the hem together.

“Um, they’re rich. Definitely richer than Songarh. You know, when all seven of us got married, my father’s treasure was practically emptied.”

“Oh,” he murmured, tucking a loose strand behind my ear.

“And yes, they’re intelligent, and certainly skilled in communication. And beautiful. You know...” I paused, unsure how to word the rest.

“Go on,” His voice was soft, and my fingers stilled on his chest.

“You know, Hukum, how people perceive and persuade beautiful women. They always have an edge when it comes to being heard, spoken to, and taken into consideration. While we... I mean, those who aren’t too approachable have to prove ourselves again and again, despite that, there are no guarantees that anyone will listen or care.” I said.

“And?” he prompted gently.

“And they have that advantage. They seem to have loving husbands, and they speak of them with such affection. It’s... great.”

I felt his fingers lift my chin. “Alright.” He smiled widely. “There are a few things you’ll need to say when they ask you certain questions,” he added, and I looked at him.

“What questions?”

He drew in a breath, locking his gaze with mine. “If they ask how things are between us in a cheap or awkward way, you’ll have to say I don’t let you sleep the whole night.” I frowned.

“What? But you let me sleep comfortably and don’t let me do anything.”

He pursed his lips. “Just say what I’m asking, alright?” His slow smile confused me.

“Why? I don’t lie.” I protested, and he stepped closer, lifting his left brow.

“So... do you want me to keep you awake all night, or are you going to lie?” he asked, and I snapped,

“Alright! You keep me awake all night.”

I didn’t understand why he was making me say all this.

“And if they ask...” he continued.

My eyes widened. *There’s more?*

“...if I like you. Or love you. Or how much I love your appearance, you’ll have to say I love how you look. And that...” he cleared his throat before saying “... I’ve kissed you... ever... every...”

“Every inch of my body,” I completed for him, gulping nervously.

“Yes, got it?” he asked, and I looked at him sharply.

“But Hukum, you didn’t. Why should I lie?” I asked, and he thinned his brows, scratching his eyebrow.

Then, suddenly, he stepped closer, causing me to step back. My spine pressed against the table as he hovered over me.

“So... you want me to kiss every inch of your body when it’s burning with sugar syrup?” he asked.

My eyes widened in shock. The words caught in my throat. Heat rolled into my cheeks, and I blinked, stunned. I swallowed and lowered my gaze.

The mere thought of his lips...

No, no, no!

"Alright. I understand," I whispered, and he smiled.

"Good."

I lifted my gaze. "So, Hukum... if a husband loves his wife, he kisses her everywhere?" I asked cautiously. A brief pause followed.

I felt his finger on my chin as his lips leaned close, brushing against mine. "A lot more than that," he whispered.

My lips trembled under his feathery touch. "Like?" I breathed.

He moved closer still. "Like kissing you. Touching you. Loving you and holding you close through the night and day. Not letting you go. Not letting you sleep. Making you laugh. Making you feel alive. Making you feel like you're the one... the only one... and claiming you." He spoke slowly.

My knees weakened beneath me. "Claiming?" I asked, and he smiled, biting his lower lip slightly.

"Like making you the mother of my children."

I lowered my gaze. "Oh," That... I was already working on it. "So... I have to say all these things if they ask about our relationship? Like... we're happy?" I asked, and he nodded.

"Yes. And you can add whatever you want," he said, then leaned in and kissed my lips gently before stepping back.

"So... if I lie, you won't do all those things for me?" I asked.

And the moment the words left my mouth, I heard how it sounded. A wide smile broke across his face, and I shook my head quickly.

"Ah.. I mean, I mean, I don't lie. So if I lie, I'll be... I'll be rotten in hell. And I don't want that," I stumbled through, trying to recover.

He chuckled. "Aishwarya, we've got a whole life to make all these lies come true."

A strong shiver ran down my spine. *A whole life?*

A whole life... as in growing up with him, having children, raising them, growing old together.

I had never really thought about it.

Not like the way he just casually said it, summarised in three simple words.

I lowered my gaze as he slipped on his footwear, his rings, and other accessories. I picked up my dupatta and wrapped it around myself.

Then I looked at ourselves in the mirror.

He smiled. "What would a perfect couple portrait look like?" he asked.

I inhaled deeply and looked at him in the mirror, standing behind me. My head rested just over his shoulder, his hand at my waist, his chin close to my hair.

I smiled. "Like us," I finished.



18 Ranvijay

A wide smile formed on my face almost instantly.

“Like us,” I repeated, leaning in to kiss her cheek. “Let’s go.”

She nodded, looking at me. “Ji.”

I saw her take a deep breath as we exited the chamber. She seemed nervous and tense already. It was her first time going back home, and I could sense that many things were waiting for us.

We stepped out of our chamber, and the attendants informed me that they had already loaded everything into the carriages.

Together, we walked toward the main entrance of the palace, where everyone was waiting.

I noticed Aishwarya subtly pull her hand away from mine when she saw Bhai-sa and Bhabhi-sa.

A small smile appeared on my face as I turned to Bhai-sa.

“Happy journey, Ranvijay,” he said, wrapping his arms around me. I returned the gesture.

“Thank you so much, Bhai-sa.”

From the corner of my eye, I saw Aishwarya speaking softly to Bhabhi-sa. Her veil was low over her forehead as she stepped closer to me.

She didn’t say anything, but we both bent to touch Bhai-sa’s feet.

“God bless you,” he said, and then we touched Bhabhi-sa’s feet as well.

“May you find each other on this journey,” she said warmly.

Bhai-sa and I chuckled.

She pulled Aishwarya into a hug and added, **“Ab aap jaa rahin hain to humara mann bhi nahi lagega,”** (Now that you’re leaving, I’ll miss you a lot.)

Aishwarya smiled and replied, ***“Hum sheegra laut aayenge, Jiji.”*** (I will come back soon, Jiji.)

They spoke a little more while I noticed Agastya rushing toward us.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” he said, slightly out of breath.

I eyed him, noticing how ready he looked. “Where are you going?”

He smiled. “With you.”

I immediately shook my head. “No, you’re not.”

Bhai-sa laughed. “He’s going to visit a friend and will accompany you only halfway.”

“Oh,” I nodded. “Very well.”

We walked toward the waiting horses, and I glanced at Aishwarya as she settled into her palanquin, then mounted my horse.

Agastya climbed his, and I smiled at Bhai-sa and Bhabhi-sa, who smiled back.

“Happy journey, Devarsa.” I smiled, and suddenly Agastya grinned and called out.

“Happy honeymoon, Bhabhi-sa!”

She burst into laughter while Bhai-sa caught her in a loose hug, watching us ride away.

As our journey began, I turned to Agastya. “So, which friend are you visiting?”

“An old one from Gurukul. It’s his sister’s wedding I’m going to attend,” he said.

“Very well. But you look tired,” I observed.

“I was up last night. There was a mistake in the calculation of the labourers’ wages and supplies. I had asked one of my assistants to handle it, but he messed it up. I had to do it all over again,” he explained.

I smiled. “Work suits you, Agastya.”

He smiled back. “You tell me, Bhai-sa... you and Bhabhi-sa, are you getting along? I mean, the way your marriage happened, it must be difficult.”

I smiled and shook my head slightly. "No, it's not difficult. But yes, I'm trying to understand her. She's pretty young, so I have to be very careful with every word."

He smiled lazily. "You always have a way with words. So, not difficult at all."

I chuckled. "Everything has its own struggles. You tell me, how's your little affair going?"

A wide smile appeared on his face, but I could sense the ache behind it.

"My affair is denying me. And I'm kind of tired of trying now."

"Why is she denying?" I asked.

He inhaled deeply, focusing ahead. "She's getting married."

A wave of shock hit me. "What? Oh my God. Is she the same girl whose wedding you're going to attend?"

He nodded with a faint smile. "Yes."

"But why are you going then?" I asked immediately.

"It's not wrong to accept rejection and move on, Bhai-sa," he said, and I exhaled slowly.

"Yes... right. But seeing her get married, won't that hurt you?"

He shook his head calmly.

"No, I think seeing her getting married will help me move on," he said, and I nodded.

"Since when did you grow up, child?" I teased, and he laughed.

We talked for a while until it was time to part ways. "All right, see you soon, Bhai-sa," he said as the partitioned convoy separated from him.

It was afternoon, and we were approaching Songarh, with only a few miles left.

As we climbed the slope, a faded architecture emerged ahead. Blurry in the distance, with orange sun rays filtering through it, the structure glowed softly as the setting sun cast its light.

We were almost there.

The fort stood atop a hill. We ascended slowly and soon reached the gates. I asked the convoy to stop.

The attendants at the entrance saw us and blew the trumpet three times in succession. The heavy, aged doors creaked open with a thrilling sound.

I stepped down from the horse and walked to the palanquin. "Come out, Aishwarya," I said, offering my hand.

She parted the curtains and slowly placed her hand in mine. Adjusting her lehenga, she stepped down gracefully and stood tall beside me.

Her gaze was lowered, and I could sense her nervousness.

"Are you okay, Aishwarya?" I asked.

She nodded slightly. "Ji."

I looked at her as she adjusted the dupatta on her head.

"Okay... if you want to run away, let's run back," I said, and she let out a soft laugh.

She lifted her gaze and shook her head. "No, Hukum."

I pulled her close, but her eyes widened as she quickly stepped back, remembering we weren't alone.

"Let's go," she said, gripping my hand tightly as she took a deep breath and moved forward.

The massive iron gates were now wide open. A few attendants stood waiting near the entrance, just ten steps away.

That's when I saw her father, accompanied by a group of men and women, walking toward us.

We slowed our pace, waiting for them to get to us.

As they drew closer, Aishwarya pulled her hand away from mine, and I lowered my gaze.

"This isn't what we agreed to, Aishwarya," I said quietly, referring to the way she'd withdrawn.

I heard her inhale sharply, blinking rapidly. "It doesn't feel right... in front of my father," she said just as they stopped in front of us.

I smiled. "Pranaam, Rajaji."

He joined his hands with a smile. "Welcome, Jawai-sa."

"Pranaam, Baapu-sa," Aishwarya said in her usual soft tone, and he smiled at her.

We both bent to touch his feet, but he shifted abruptly, laughing. "You don't have to do that, hahaha!"

We straightened, and I noticed a group of veiled women standing nearby, giggling. It was already making me uncomfortable. I didn't know why, but a crowd of giggling ladies always made me feel vaguely nauseous.

"Aishwarya!"

A few of them rushed past her father and threw themselves at her. I saw her eyes brighten as she smiled.

"Jiji," she said with light excitement, and before I could even process what was happening, they pulled her inside.

I glanced at her father. "Welcome, Jawai-sa," he said again, and I nodded.

We walked inside together, and I let my eyes wander over the strong, aged architecture of Songarh.

It wasn't a large kingdom, but it was one of the wealthiest states under the Suryagarh division.

The deep-red stone walls stood tall and strong, surrounded by the lush green of the gardens. The air held the chirping of birds and the hum of insects. Everything shimmered under the glow of the orange sun.

"How is everyone at home, Jawai-sa? How is Ranaji?" His voice broke my gaze.

I smiled. "Everyone is well. The reconstruction of the outer settlements has begun. Soon, the issue of shelter for the movers will be resolved."

He nodded, pleased. "That is a good thing. Please come inside." He guided me into a hall.

My eyes fell on the couches arranged around the room, occupied by several men, each of them looking at me.

The tables were adorned with sweets, fruits, and savoury dishes. Some were casually enjoying a hookah.

I smiled. **“Khamma Ghani,”** (Many greetings.) I entered with my hands joined in greeting, with my sword at my side.

“Ghani Khamma,” came the reply. I guessed they were Aishwarya’s sisters’ husbands.

I stepped toward a vacant seat beside a young man and sat down. “Veer Singh Malwa,” he introduced himself.

“Ranvijay Dev Singh,” I replied.

He passed me the pipe of the hookah, and I took it politely.

My eyes scanned the men around me. Their laughter was loud, casual... and, frankly, cheap.

“So, you’re the brother of Rudra Dev Singh?” The man beside me asked, and I glanced at him with a brief nod.

“Yes, I am.”

His brows drew together as he nodded lazily.

He reached out to pick a sweet from the plate, and my gaze drifted back to the men seated around us, whispering, throwing sideways glances my way.

“So, you’ve got ties to Mahabaleshgarh too?” he asked.

I nodded again. **“Ji, humaare Bhai-sa ka sasural hai.”** (Yes, it’s my Bhaisa’s in-laws’ home.)

His eyes widened. “Oh.”

“So... what do they have to say about the snakes?” he asked casually.

I looked at him, surprised.

The conversation was turning darker.

They kept puffing on their hookahs. The air was dense, not just with smoke, but with something heavier.

Something’s definitely cooking in here.

I brought the pipe to my lips and inhaled a slow, deep puff. The smoke settled thick in my throat before I exhaled, keeping my gaze steady on them.

A few of them watched me, and I turned calmly to the man beside me. “Snakes?” I asked in a light tone.

He stared at me in silence before I handed the pipe back to him.

My Bhai-sa always called me a sniper for this.

"Yes," he replied. "Seems like someone's funding the snakes... from the other side of the mountains."

I swallowed, narrowing my eyes.

That was new to me. I hadn't heard a word about this.

"What would you propose if something were to happen?"

A new voice broke in sharply.

I turned to the man who had just pulled himself out of another conversation.

A brief silence followed.

One, because something was clearly wrong. Two, I didn't yet know what it was. Three, all of them seemed to know something, and I was the only one in the dark.

"Whatever keeps all of us safe," I said evenly.

Another man chuckled, "Despite you having empty trunks?"

Laughter erupted in the room.

Calmly, I met his gaze, unbothered by his remark. I took another puff and exhaled.

"Yes. Because most of that 'empty' wealth is being used to pay workers, migrants from Ratangarh, driven here by unemployment."

His face dropped instantly, and he clenched his jaw.

Heavy, cold silence returned.

I looked straight at him. I remembered his face; he'd been at Bhaissa's crowning ceremony, watching everything closely.

It was obvious. People were jealous. They didn't like that we were in the spotlight.

And what do you do when people envy you?

I smiled faintly.

Leaning back against the couch, I crossed my right leg over the left and let my gaze sweep over the room.

Burn them with your fire.



19 Aishwarya

The expectant gazes of my sisters, seated around me on the couch, weighed heavily on me, as each of them awaited my answers.

I inhaled deeply, interlacing my fingers that rested on my lap. My toes curled in hushed panic, and for more reasons than I could count, I was feeling deeply uncomfortable.

First, I hadn't seen them in so long. Second, I was married. Third... their smiles were making me more anxious.

Still, I kept a wide smile fixed on my face.

One of my sisters, in her late thirties, who was also a mother to two and the Queen of Ratangarh, asked, "So, how's your new home?"

I swallowed hard.

"Beautiful," I replied with a polite smile. "Everyone loves me there." As I said that, the memory of Jiji, Ranaji, Devar-sa, Badi-maa, and everyone from Suryagarh flashed through my mind.

"How many people are in your family?" Another sister asked, nibbling on sweets. She'd put on weight lately, probably for similar reasons, but she looked adorably chubby.

"Um... Hukum, Ranaji, Jiji, Devar-sa, Badimaa... their daughters-in-law only." I answered, and she smiled.

"No mother-in-law?" she asked.

I shook my head. "No."

Just then, my stomach growled, and I reached for a sweet and looked up to see Anika running toward me.

"Maasi-maa!" She plopped down beside me, and I gathered her into a warm hug.

"Anika!"

She was my eleven-year-old niece, a lively girl with bright eyes, and the daughter of my older sister.

"You look so pretty, Maasimaa," she said with a giggle, and I kissed her cheek.

"Not more than you," I whispered, and she giggled again, until her eyes locked on my neck.

"What happened to your neck?"

A flush crept up my cheeks as Hukum's lips brushing my skin flickered in memory.

I smiled faintly. "Nothing."

My fingers instinctively reached up, trying to cover the mark.

But then, one of my sisters cut in. "Anika, go play. Let us talk."

Anika smiled sweetly and ran off, and I looked up again, adjusting my dupatta.

"So... how's your husband? Does he like you?" One of them asked. "Father told us how you two got married. He didn't even ask to see you before, did he?"

There was a thin smile on her lips, and I couldn't tell if it was teasing or genuine. I swallowed, unsure whether I should be amused or hurt.

Hukum hadn't warned me how to answer this.

I frowned slightly, trying to seem displeased, then answered softly, "He doesn't let me sleep all night, Jiji."

I risked a glance up, and every single one of them was staring at me in stunned silence. Then laughter erupted.

"Really? So... are you just his toy?" one of them asked, shifting closer with a smirk.

Confused, I blinked. *What does that mean?*

I wasn't his toy. I was his wife.

"I'm his wife, Jiji."

"Only wife?" she shot back, raising her brows.

I bit my inner lip and nodded. "Yes. I'm his only wife."

One of them narrowed her eyes at me. "So... no affairs?"

I paused, overcome with a strong sense of unease. "Affair?" I asked stiffly.

"The other woman," another clarified.

I blinked again, then shook my head quickly. "I don't think so. He's not like that. He got angry when I once asked him to marry another woman."

They laughed again, perhaps finding it quite amusing.

"We don't believe you, Aishwarya," one of them said. "That man married you without seeing your face. And he has no affairs? So, does he love you?"

Although he had never said the words, I... sensed it. And so I replied with conviction, "Yes, he does."

Another sister scoffed, "Only to sleep with you, I guess." And with that, more laughter echoed.

I gulped because I didn't know what to say anymore.

Then came another voice. "So, does he just come to you for that? Or does he actually love you? I mean... kisses, tenderness, and all?"

"What's the difference, Jiji?" I asked softly.

She leaned in and gently cupped my cheek. "You're still so naïve, Aishwarya. He doesn't let you sleep, it must hurt... but does he kiss you gently? Love you slowly?"

Before I could even think, I blurted, "He kisses every inch of my body."

Her eyes widened in shock.

"Every inch?" The ones beside me leaned in.

"Every inch? You mean down there, too?"

My heart pounded as I remembered what Hukum had told me to lie about. So I nodded.

"Oh... wow." They grinned, whispering between themselves.

One of them, seated beside me, bit her lower lip. "How does it feel?" she asked in a hush, and I blinked rapidly.

Truth was, I didn't know. But seeing their fascination, their delight... I thought it must feel good.

"Wonderful," I managed to say.

And then she asked me, "So... he sucks you? Oh my God! That's unbelievable."

My brows knitted together in a line. "Why is that unbelievable, Jiji?" I asked.

She chuckled, brushing her hair behind her ear. "I mean... he's so handsome, so attractive, and you're... not even close to his league."

Her words hit like a stone in my chest. I lowered my gaze, trying not to let the sharpness sting.

"But he does," I said softly, but they only giggled again.

"We're so jealous of you, Aishwarya," one of my sisters said, and I looked up at her.

"Why, Jiji?"

She glanced away with a faint blush on her cheeks. "Because your husband satisfies you."

I blinked. "But... I think all husbands who love their wives do that," I replied honestly, and she laughed.

"You wish."

I frowned slightly in confusion, and a slight pause hung in the air.

"By the way, Aishwarya, we all missed your cooking," one of my elder sisters said, and I looked at her. A small, yet proud smile touched my lips. "I've told everyone in my palace," she added with a beaming grin, "that my youngest sister makes the best food in the world."

"That's true, Aishwarya," another sister chimed in warmly. "We really miss it."

"Could you please cook something for us?"

I nodded slowly. "Ji, of course."

Just then, another sister spoke. "Then be quick. Tonight we're planning to celebrate and apply mehendi."

"Mehendi?" I echoed, creasing my brows together.

"Kal Teeja ka vrat hai, Aishwarya," (Tomorrow is Teej. The fasting.) she explained.

"Oh..." I nodded. "Alright."

I stood up from the couch and said, "Then I should hurry," I said.

They smiled. "Yes, you should."

I lowered my gaze and turned to walk out of the chamber, but as I moved, inaudible whispers trailed behind me.

She's lying.

How could he? He's so handsome.

She's hiding something...

I inhaled slowly, steadying myself. Yes, I was lying. I was hiding something. But... who cared?

I smiled faintly to myself and kept walking.

It had been a while since I had cooked anyway. Today was as good a day as any.

I made my way to the kitchen, and as soon as I stepped inside, the staff immediately noticed me.

"Bai-sa!!!"

Their warm greetings echoed around, and I returned the smiles.

"Pranaam," I said, joining my palms.

The head cook came forward, joining his hands in a greeting with a bright smile. "What brings you here, Bai-sa?"

"Cooking," I said simply.

He shook his head in disbelief. "But why? You must've just arrived."

"I'm well, Kaka," I said with a soft laugh. "My sisters wanted something cooked with my hands. I've come to fulfil their wish."

He smiled, nodding in understanding.

I walked toward the large vessels and supplies and got to work. I decided to make ***Dal-Baati-Choorma*** for Hukum too. It was his favourite.

It took a while, and by the time I had finished, the sky had turned dark.

Breathing deeply, I looked toward the head cook. "Kaka, please arrange the plates," I said respectfully before walking out to head back to my chamber.

I needed a bath desperately.

When I stepped inside, I saw Hukum sitting on the bed. A frown creased his forehead, as if he were drifting off in thought.

"Hukum," I said softly.

He looked up at me with a smile. "Aishwarya."

I walked toward him, and his gaze narrowed. "Why are you sweating?" he asked casually, reached for my wrist and pulled me beside him.

"Ah, I was cooking," I said, pulling the dupatta down to catch some air.

"Cooking? Has your father invited you here to cook now?" he asked curtly.

I shook my head immediately. "No, Hukum. My sisters were missing the taste of my hand.

He nodded and placed a gentle kiss on my hand.

The softness of his lips against my knuckles made butterflies flutter through me.

"You're so sweet, Aishwarya," he murmured, and I asked softly, "You look worried, Hukum."

He nodded, dropping his gaze tensely. "Yes. Because something is happening right under our noses that we need to worry about."

I stiffened slightly. "What is it?"

He drew a long breath, focusing his eyes on me. "The most I've gathered... is that something's coming for us from behind the mountain ranges. I don't know if it's a group of rebels, an empire, or something else entirely. And someone from the Indira is funding them. But... I don't know who."

I frowned. "But... why would they do that?"

He gazed steadily at me. "Because it's easy for them."

My brows narrowed further. "How?"

He exhaled slowly. "Because we're young. We're new. We don't have the weight of ancestral legacies. We do have enemies, and no successor yet. So, we're easy to target."

My gaze dropped as a thought struck me. "Then... why are Jiji and Ranaji not having a baby?"

He gave me a piercing look, as if my question had taken him aback.

"They've just gotten married, Aishwarya. It hasn't even been a year. They're working hard to build a powerful empire. Maybe Bhabhi-sa and Bhai-sa just aren't ready yet."

"Oh," I said quietly, lowering my gaze.

"Bai-sa," an attendant's voice broke the silence, and I looked up quickly.

"Ji?"

"Dinner will be served soon." She informed us, and I nodded.

"Alright."

Once she left, I looked back at Hukum. "I should take a bath."

He smiled slightly, and as I was about to stand, he leaned in and pressed a soft kiss to my lips.

But the moment his mouth met mine, a bitter, smoky taste coated my tongue, and I pulled back instinctively. "You smoked?"

He blinked and nodded stiffly. "A few puffs."

I frowned. "Oh..."

He looked a little sheepish. "Umm... actually, I needed to gather information from some people. And they were smoking. Sometimes, to become one of them... you have to be one of them."

"Oh," I said again, not entirely sure what to make of it.

A beat passed before I asked softly, "Are you worried, Hukum?" He looked at me. "I mean... you're so intelligent. You always think ahead. There must be a solution to this, too."

He chuckled. "You should go take a bath... before I end up kissing you harshly."

I shuddered at his words, and my smile faded.

Blinking nervously, when I met his gaze, it wasn't soft, and it wasn't dangerous either. It was intense, like he was seeing through me, deeper than I was ready for.

I looked away to break the tension and quickly stood up, feeling my heart thudding.

"Ji," I murmured, before walking into my old bathroom. The same place where I had grown up and the one I wished I'd never have to leave.

But things change.

And more rapidly than one can ever imagine.

A faint smile touched my lips as I realised how much had changed. There was a time I dreaded marriage and wanted to stay here forever. But now... all I wanted was to return to my new home and my new family.

Because sometimes, blood doesn't bind you like love does. And quiet, yet constant love for Hukum had bound me to him, to Jiji, to Devar-sa.

They felt like home.

There was a time when I used to wait endlessly for my sisters to visit Suryagarh, just to talk... to feel anything. But even being here, at my home, I didn't feel the same.

And that shift made me feel... guilty that... my heart was drifting.

I undressed and sat on the stone stool to bathe.

Unlike Suryagarh, we didn't have luxurious pools; instead, we had traditional stone stools, vessels, and cool water.

Only my father's chamber had a private bathing pool.

Songarh, after all, was built on a hill, far from any major river. Water was scarce. It took real effort from the attendants to pull it from wells and ponds.

I dipped the metal vessel into the large basin and poured it over my shoulder.

The coldness hit me in a wave, making me shiver.

Winter's coming.

I finished quickly, dried off, and changed into a fresh, light yellow outfit. The maroon attire I had worn all day had felt like armour. This felt like a fresh breath.

Only the weight of the jewellery still clung to me, because I couldn't remove it.

A newlywed bride, on her first visit home after marriage, was expected to look her finest. It was a matter of status and honour more than beauty.

Even if no one had asked me to wear it, I remembered how my sisters once returned in full splendour, with their necks weighed down in gold, and their smiles shimmering with pride.

I tied my curls into a neat bun as I stepped out of the bathroom. He was still sitting on the bed, lost in deep thought.

When I entered, he lifted his gaze and rose to his feet. As he inched toward the mirror, my eyes followed his movements.

Taking my gaze off him, I reached for the vermilion bottle and added a line to the parting of my hair and a small dot to the centre of my forehead.

While I adjusted my dupatta, I felt his slow, bare footsteps behind me.

I inhaled sharply as his arms slipped around my waist from behind.

My back pressed into his chest as he leaned into my neck, resting there without saying a word. His eyes were closed, and his breath fanned across my shoulder.

Despite being frozen in my place, my heart somersaulted in his intense hold.

"It'll be alright, Hukum," I whispered.

His arms tightened around me, pulling my back flush against him. I felt his lips draw near the front of my neck.

His hot breath tickled my skin, and a familiar shiver ran down my spine, curling into my knees.

"Did you talk to your sisters?" he asked.

"Ji," I whispered.

He brushed his lips lazily across my neck, and my eyes fluttered. Every nerve in me came alive with the heat and bliss of his touch.

"Did you say what I asked you to?"

“Ji.”

I drew in a breath as he parted his lips and kissed my neck softly. It felt like he had pulled the breath right out of me.

“But... they didn’t believe me,” I said faintly. “They said I’m your toy. That you don’t love me.”

He pulled back immediately. “What?” As he turned me around, I saw his face, which displayed a mix of shock and mounting rage.

“Ji,” I nodded.

The softness vanished from his face, replaced by a flash of fury. “How dare they?”

I gave him a small smile. “I don’t think it’s their fault.”

His brows pulled in. “Why not?”

I turned back toward the mirror, adjusting my dupatta across my chest. “Because maybe... they’ve never felt what I feel. People usually speak from their own experience.”

He frowned but listened.

“But, Aishwarya, you are not a toy. You’re not anything shameful. You are my wife.”

“I know,” I said softly. “I told them that. But they couldn’t believe it, maybe because I’m not beautiful. And you... You’re the most handsome man they’ve ever seen. So for them, it’s hard to accept that I’m your first and only wife. The only woman in your life.”

He stared at me for a beat, then leaned forward and kissed the side of my head.

“You are, Aishwarya. You are the first and the last woman in my life,” he said, and I smiled.

“I know.”

“Did it hurt you when they said that?” he asked gently. “Are you okay... if they don’t believe you?”

I nodded, inhaling deeply. I turned to face him, and he looked straight into my eyes.

“No, it didn’t hurt. I know the truth, and somewhere in my heart, I know that no matter what happens, what I do or what you do, they’ll always have something to say. They

always have," though I began with a firm tone, it softened by the end. "And strangely... I'm tired now. Tired of thinking about what they think of me. Of us. I'm so tired of it, Hukum,"

He listened in silence while I spoke, and my words became increasingly difficult to bear. Each word felt heavier than the one before it.

"For the first time in my life, I feel like I'm worth something and that I deserve someone. The time I've spent with you in the past few days has made me detach from everything I used to know. It cleared my mind. If I believed what they said, I might start questioning myself and everything around me. And I don't want that,"

I paused, swallowing the lump in my throat.

"I still don't know exactly what I want... but I know what I don't want. I don't want to stay away from you. I don't want to listen to anyone but you. I don't want anyone's eyes on me except yours. I truly... truly don't want to care about anything else,"

I looked straight into his eyes again with certainty. "I want to hear only what you have to say."

I meant every single word. I wanted only to be near him. With him, I felt safe. With him, I didn't feel judged, no matter how loudly I laughed, how I looked, how I behaved, or how many mistakes I made.

His hands cupped my cheeks, and a gentle smile lifted the corners of his lips.

"Now you're becoming the feather inked in my colour, Aishwarya," he whispered.

He pulled me closer, and his lips found mine in a slow kiss.

"You're not my toy," he murmured between gentle kisses, and with another affectionate kiss, he added, "And you are so beautiful, Aishwarya. Inside and out."

A shy smile crept onto my lips. "They must be waiting for us in the dining hall," I said quietly.

He placed another deep, lingering kiss. "And I do love you."

His words sent a shiver down my spine. "You do?" I gasped in amazement.

He kissed my cheek. "I do."

My cheeks flushed with sudden warmth, but before I could respond, a loud thud startled me, and I jumped at the sharp noise.

Something had fallen.

We both turned toward the window. The sound had come from outside. A moment later, we heard the faint tinkling of anklets like someone was running.

"Someone was watching us," he said darkly.

I swallowed. "It could've been one of my sisters. They didn't believe me earlier... maybe they came to see for themselves."

His brows furrowed in disbelief. "What?" he said with a look of both confusion and irritation. "Who does that? Are they stupid or what?"

I couldn't help but laugh.

"You're laughing, Aishwarya?" he asked, still fuming, but my laughter only deepened.

His stern expression slowly softened as he watched me, and his eyes sparkled with amusement. But when he stepped closer, my laughter faded.

Suddenly, my eyes fluttered nervously. I took a step back... and he stepped forward. I took another step... he followed.

Before I could escape entirely, he caught my wrist and pulled me into his arms.

"I think you need more laughter," he said with a grin. "And they need more of a show."

His arms encircled my waist, and my heart skipped several beats. "What do you mean?" I asked, breathing heavily.

"You'll see," he said with a mischievous glint. "Let's go."

I nodded as we both headed out of the chamber toward the dining hall.

When I was adjusting the dupatta properly over my head with one hand, he gently held my other hand.

As we walked through the courtyard, I could feel the curious, drifting eyes of the attendants and staff following us.

I took a deep breath before stepping into the dining hall.

Despite it being my home, I was nervous... anxious to walk in beside my husband.

"Calm down," he whispered.

I subtly tried to slip my hand from his, but he held on, unyielding.

The moment we entered, the entire room fell silent. Every eye turned toward us.

The men sat on the couches, and the women stood to the side with the servers.

We moved toward an empty spot. Hukum sat down and looked at me, waiting for me to take the space beside him.

But I hesitated and quietly walked to the side.

"Aap nahi baithengi, Aishwarya?" (You're not sitting? Aishwarya?) His voice rang out, startling me.

I looked at him nervously and shook my head. **"Ji nahi... Aapke bhojan ke pashchaat hum grahan kar lenge."** (No... I'll have dinner after yours.)

He chuckled. **"Kyun? Humein aapse adhik bhook lagti hai?"** (Why? Am I hungrier than you?) he retorted in a voice just loud enough for everyone to hear.

Shameful smiles crept onto the faces of a few men. One of my sisters' husbands chimed in smugly.

"Humaare yahaan streeyaan purushoan se poorv bhojan grahan nahi karti," (Here, women don't eat before men.)

Hukum lifted his eyes to him and snickered.

"Vichitra baat hai! Jo swayam annapoorna ka swaroop hai, wo pratham baar bhojan karne ke

adhikaar se vanchit hai!” (How strange! The one who herself is a symbol of Annapoorna is deprived of the right to eat first!) he said, and something twisted hard in my stomach.

The entire dining hall fell utterly silent until my father forced out an uneasy chuckle. “Haha... that’s not true, Jawaai-sa. Aishwarya, sit with him.”

I looked at Baapu-sa, who had a thin smile on, and then at my sisters, who seemed nervous. And finally, my gaze strayed towards their husbands, who wore looks of disbelief and shock as they stared at Hukum.

“But, Baapu-sa... I’ll eat with them after all,” I said softly.

Hukum lifted his eyes from the empty plate to look directly at me. “I’m sure your sisters, too, can eat with their husbands today,” he suggested calmly, turning to the other men. “I’m sure none of them would have a problem with that. After all, they all look like caring noblemen.”

There was a beat of silence. I saw a few of the men inhale slowly, then glance at their wives. Finally, one of them cleared his throat and said, “Of course, we are. Come, Mayuri, sit with me.”

A tentative smile tugged at my lips.

“Yes, she can,” another said.

“Of course. Why not?”

Similarly, indistinct but affirming voices followed. I looked at my sisters nervously, stepping forward slowly, sitting down beside their husbands.

“Come, Aishwarya,” Hukum called gently.

I gulped and offered a timid smile. “Ji, Hukum.”

I walked towards him, and he shifted slightly to make room for me. I sat beside him carefully, feeling my every move being watched. My sisters were also taking seats. They looked surprised and uneasy.

The attendants moved forward to place additional plates, but Hukum raised his hand.

“No need. We’ll share.”

A wave of nervousness rolled through me, tying a knot in my stomach. My fingers trembled terribly, and my throat went dry. I wished to disappear.

"We will share too," said one of my sisters' husbands, and then another repeated the same. Soon, the rest followed.

I glanced at my father, who was smiling and watching us, and I averted my gaze, a whirlwind of storm building in my heart.

The attendants began serving dinner, and I caught Hukum watching me. My heart pounded wildly as his eyebrows lifted, making me want to sink into the ground with timidity.

I had never dined with guests before. I always ate my meals by myself in my chamber. Eating in front of others made me so nervous that I could barely eat at all.

As the food was being served on the shared thalis, the rich aroma of spices, ghee, and vegetables drifted up and wetted my throat. I hadn't realised how hungry I was until now.

"Have first, Aishwarya," Hukum said carefully, trying not to draw attention.

"Aap lijiye, Hukum... pehle aap chakhkar bataaiye."
(You eat first, Hukum. Let me know how it tastes.)

He smiled and reached for the plate. I watched, waiting for him to take a bite. Instead, he tore a piece and held it out to me.

I nervously shook my head, darting my eyes around the hall.

"They're watching, Hukum," I whispered.

He smiled again calmly. "Yes. They're watching how you're keeping your husband waiting."

I opened my mouth instinctively, letting him feed me the bite. The spicy, rich taste of the curry burst on my tongue, and I gasped softly at how delicious it was.

He smiled and turned back to the plate, tearing another piece for himself.

I waited, expecting a compliment, a word of praise, or something, but nothing came.

After a few quiet moments, as he turned to me again, my eyes brightened with hope.

But he asked, "Why are you not eating?"

The smile faded from my lips, and I swallowed hard.

"I... I am eating," I murmured and reached for the food. The bangles on my wrist clinked as I moved sharply, even among the sounds of anklets, bells, and utensils.

I exhaled quietly, tore a piece of baati, and served myself.

He still hadn't said a word about the food.

Isn't it good enough? The thought clung to me. I tried to push it away, to concentrate on eating.

Around me, my sisters were smiling, chatting softly, and eating with their husbands.

"Bhojan atyant swaadisht bana hai, Aishwarya,"
(The food is really delicious, Aishwarya.) One of my sisters' voices broke through the haze, and I looked at her.

A real, grateful smile stretched across my lips. "Thank you, Jiji," I said softly.

"Really," another sister added. "It's delicious, Princess." Her husband added a few words of praise, and soon, more compliments followed about the food.

Hukum looked at me and then turned to one of my sisters' husbands. "I'm sure it's nothing compared to what your wives cook. Aishwarya told me that all her sisters are amazing cooks," he said.

I blinked, feeling momentarily perplexed. *When the hell did I say that?*

My sister's husband chuckled. "Well, yes, she cooks really well."

"Yes, my wife too."

"I agree. They do."

A few more echoed similar sentiments, and I gulped nervously.

Well, that just told me I'm not special at all.

“Great! I’d really love to taste their cooking,” Hukum added cheerfully.

Something twisted in my stomach.

He had never said that to me. Never asked to taste what I made. But he wanted to try what my sisters cooked?

I looked at them, smiling nervously, not daring to say anything in front of their husbands, and then Hukum said, “Tomorrow then? After the fast breaks?”

“Absolutely,” one husband agreed.

“Yes, sure,” said another.

What the hell is happening?

Hukum smiled at them, and I turned my focus to the food still in my mouth, chewing slowly and trying not to reveal anything on my face.

A few more conversations flowed around me, and I stayed silent.

Once dinner was over, the attendants began collecting the empty plates and placing bowls of water in front of each of us to wash our hands.

I dipped my hands first as Hukum was still talking. But just as I started washing, I felt his hands dip into the bowl too, absentmindedly.

When our fingers touched, I instinctively tried to pull back, but he held my fingers under the water and brushed his thumb along mine. And my heart just flipped.

I looked up to see the other men casually washing their hands and talking. Hukum appeared immersed in their conversation.

I carefully pulled my hand away from his grasp without drawing attention.

“Chaliye ab in sabko Mehendi lagane dete hain,”
(Let’s leave all of them for the Mehendi now.) One of my elder sister’s husbands said, and everyone agreed.

“Ji, of course,” his wife said, standing up from the couch.

The rest followed, and I, too, stood up to leave.

I looked at Hukum, who smiled at me. "Don't stay up too late," he said softly.

"Ji," I nodded with a smile.

I followed my sisters as we made our way to our eldest sister's room, where the Mehendi ceremony was set to take place.

As soon as we entered, the attendants shut the door behind us.

"I thought he would kill me!" one of my sisters exclaimed dramatically.

I looked at her in confusion. "Why?"

"You didn't see the look he gave me. It was as if he'd eat me alive before touching food!"

Her expression made me laugh, and everyone suddenly turned to me.

"You're laughing? All this happened because of your husband!" one of them teased.

I laughed harder as I stepped into the room and settled onto the couch.

"So... does he always like eating with you the way he said?" One of them asked.

I nodded. "Yes, but not when he's dining with his brothers. Then it's either just the two of us or the three of them together. My Devar-sa isn't married yet."

She smiled, though I could sense a trace of envy behind it. "You're lucky to have such a family," she mumbled.

I smiled back. "You all must visit someday. I'm sure everyone would love to meet you."

Their smiles faded slightly. Was I learning? Absolutely.

They nodded slowly, and one of them abruptly said, "Let's start."

She handed me a bowl of henna and a thin neem stick. "I'm first," she said, sitting beside me.

I was the only one among us who knew how to apply Mehendi properly. And whenever I was home, they never needed to call a henna artist.

I took her hand and dipped the stick into the thick green paste. The conversations continued as I worked, and I focused on the patterns forming on her palms.

One by one, they left after their designs were done. As the night grew darker, I felt like collapsing from fatigue, but I couldn't stop, not until I finished my task.

"I'm sleepy; can you please hurry, Aishwarya?" my eldest sister groaned. She was the last one left.

I nodded slowly. "Ji, Jiji."

She yawned at least a hundred times before I drew the final curl on her hand.

"It's done," I said finally.

She let out another yawn. "Thank you so much. Now, can you please leave? I'm so tired."

I stood up quickly, taking the bowl with me. "Of course," I replied, exhaling my frustration silently.

Everyone's asleep, and my own hands are still bare.

I swallowed my irritation and walked out, heading toward my chamber.

When I stepped inside, the soft golden lamps were still burning. I saw Hukum sitting on the couch with a book in his hand.

"You're extremely late, Aishwarya," he said without even looking up.

I paused in surprise. *How does he know it's me?*

"I'm sorry, Hukum," I murmured and walked toward him.

He closed the book and finally looked at me. "Show me. How's it?"

I frowned. "What?"

"Your hands, what else?" He grabbed my forearms and turned my palms upward. His smile immediately vanished. "You haven't applied Mehendi?" he asked.

I inhaled deeply. "I have. But... only on my sisters' hands," I said with a soft laugh.

He pulled me beside him, and I landed lazily on the couch. "It's not funny, Aishwarya," he said, slightly frustrated.

I set the bowl down on the table. "I'm tired, Hukum."

He looked at me for a moment, then reached for my hands. "Let me do that," he said.

I blinked. *Did I hear him right?*

"You... know how to apply Mehndi?"

He shook his head. "No. But something is better than nothing."

I smiled, biting my lower lip to hold in a grin.

Honestly, nothing could be better than a husband applying Teej Mehendi on his wife's hands.

I leaned my head against his shoulder while he awkwardly held the neem stick, trying to sketch something onto my palm.

I closed my eyes, letting the weight of the day melt away with every slow, ticklish stroke of the Mehendi he was tracing on my skin.



20 Ranvijay

I was struggling with the small neem stick, trying to keep it stable to draw even a simple circle on her palm. I lifted my gaze to her face, which rested softly on my shoulder. Her eyes were closed, and the tiredness on her face was evident, yet there was also a calm, serene glow washing over her.

I inhaled deeply, staring at her beautiful face, and a slight smile touched my lips.

She was so precious. So gentle. So soothing.

In a world full of selfish people, she was the most selfless soul I had ever met. She simply didn't know how to say 'No'. She was someone who valued relationships without measuring them against the weight of toxicity or neglect.

Well... maybe that's because she didn't fully know how dark things around her had been.

She shifted slightly, as if she were looking for more comfort. Gently, without waking her, I pulled her closer to my chest.

Stretching out my legs on the couch, I carefully lifted her legs and placed them over mine, letting her rest fully. She moved again, finding a more comfortable spot against me, and I smiled at the way her soft curls danced beside her face. She looked even smaller, more delicate in a way that went beyond looks.

I lay reclined on the couch, slouching my back against the handrest, with a pillow behind me. Her body nestled between my legs, and she pressed her back against my chest and torso. She shifted once more, curling up against me, and I leaned down to kiss the side of her forehead. She inhaled softly and pushed her head closer to my lips, instinctively seeking warmth.

Aww, my baby.

“Hukum,” she murmured in her sleep.

“Hmm?” I whispered in the same slow voice, waiting.

But she said nothing more. Her breath steadied, slipping back into deep sleep. I glanced down at the jewellery still adorning her neck and face, far too heavy for such a tired body.

Carefully, I brought my hand to the clasp of her necklace and touched the nape of her neck. I gently lifted it, finding the hook. My other hand moved with practised care to undo it, and she let out a soft moan.

The faint cry made my stomach twist. I bit down on my lower lip to stay composed.

Slowly, I pulled the necklace away from her skin and placed it quietly on the table. Then, I moved to her earrings, which came off more easily. After that, her nose ring.

That one took the most care.

I slowly unhooked the tiny latch from the piercing, and she wrinkled her nose at the sensation. Her brows twitched, and her eyes clenched tighter. I paused immediately.

After a few moments, she relaxed again, and I continued. Once the nose ring was off, I moved on to the hair accessory adorning her forehead. That was easier.

At last, she looked at peace.

Her cheek rested against my chest, and her breath was soft. I could see how exhausted she was.

I lifted my hand to caress her cheek with my thumb, and she leaned into the touch, welcoming it without even waking.

She looked like a baby. Her legs lay over mine, and her hands remained folded on her stomach.

I slowly reached for one of her hands and took it in mine, and pulled the henna bowl closer.

Dipping the stick into the thick green paste, I brought it close to her palm and attempted to draw a circle in the centre.

It took me several tries to get it right. Even after all the effort, it wasn't perfect; it just kept getting bigger and messier. How does she do all that fine thread-work on cloth? I couldn't even manage a one-round shape.

Eventually, I settled for an almost-round circle and let it be.

I stared at the imperfect shape, trying to think of how to make it look nicer.

Maybe dots around it... like a Rangoli?

The idea made me smile. I began drawing thick dots in a circle around the centre.

Better. That's something. What next?

Still, it looked incomplete.

I paused and looked around. My gaze landed on the nearby candle stand. It was made of metal, with a delicate and intricate pattern of flowers and petals. Beautiful.

Petals!

I looked back at her palm.

What if I draw lotus petals around the centre?

I inhaled deeply and tried to focus.

I drew eight evenly spaced lines around the circle, like the rays of the sun. Each line was the base of a petal.

I struggled to maintain an equal distance, keeping the henna from dripping too much in one place, and controlling the stick that seemed to have a mind of its own. It was harder than I had expected.

Then, I joined each pair of lines to form petals.

It wasn't perfect. The lines weren't sharp. The stick kept smudging here and there.

But I went on, concentrating more than I had in a long time.

And somehow, after all that effort, I finished it.

It actually looked like a proper flower. I stared at it, stunned.

I can't believe I just did that. A small smile curved on my lips.

I looked at her hand, adorned with that modest little design. It was beautiful. But also... still too empty.

I blinked silently, trying to figure out how to make it more elegant, when the thought of filling the petals struck me.

Yes, that'll look great.

I immediately began filling the empty petals, and now her hand looked even more beautiful.

My neck ached, and my eyes stung with the amount of concentration I was putting in.

After completing the petals, I moved on to paint her fingers with the henna. I was so slow that the paste began drying too quickly. I filled the upper half of her small fingers the same way she had worn it on our wedding day.

It took a long time, but it turned out well.

Then I turned her hand over and painted the backs of her fingers with henna. Her nails already had red mahavar on them, and her hand looked immensely beautiful.

I drew another lotus on the back of her hand. This time, it was easier; it took less time than the first one.

That was it.

One hand completed.

I began working on the other hand, drawing the same pattern. It was already very late by the time I finished. My fingers and wrists were aching. I exhaled deeply after the last stroke and pressed my head back against the pillow to stretch.

Finally!

I tried to breathe deeply, feeling exhausted.

Even my studies had never tired me like this. But drawing these designs on her hand felt like the most exhausting thing I'd ever done.

Suddenly, Aishwarya shifted. I lifted my head and looked at her hand.

She stretched her arms a little, and the moment I realised she was about to clench her fists, I immediately grabbed her wrist.

“No,” I whispered, and she stopped at once.

She lazily opened her eyes, blinking up at her hands. “Oh my God,” she breathed, her eyes widening as she straightened and spread her fingers wide to see clearly. “It’s beautiful, Hukum,” she said in a sleepy voice, and I smiled.

“You think?” I asked, and she lifted her gaze to me.

“I love it. Thank you so much.”

She leaned closer, but I tried to caution her. “Careful, you’ll ruin it.”

Her soft gaze met mine, and slowly, she turned sideways. The side of her waist pressed against my stomach as she placed her elbows on my chest. Seeing a loose strand of her hair dance in front of her face, I reached up and tucked it behind her ear.

Her gaze flickered between my eyes and my lips, and I felt my heartbeat slowing in my chest.

I slowly leaned in, and she tilted her face slightly. Our lips were just inches apart. Her breathing turned uneven. I blinked when she moved forward and pressed her soft lips to mine.

It took a few moments for me to register that she was kissing me. My lashes fluttered shut as I gave in, wrapping my arm around her waist.

She slowly parted her lips, and so did too. I inhaled deeply when I felt her take my lower lip between hers. She sucked softly, just for a moment, then pulled back and looked into my eyes.

I stared back at her, stunned by the wave of emotions flooding me. I couldn’t believe she had kissed me.

She drew in a deep breath and stretched her arms forward, resting her elbows on either side of my shoulders. Her palms hung in the air as she lay her face gently against my chest.

A slight smile tugged at my lips, and I asked quietly, “Want to go to bed, Aishwarya?”

I felt her breathing calmly against me. She shook her head.

"You're different, Hukum," she exclaimed. Her voice was hoarse, as if she had been crying.

"Hey, baby." I immediately cupped her cheek and made her look at me. The moment I saw the tears in her eyes, my heart skipped a beat. "Why are you crying? Is it not beautiful?" I asked, confused.

She shook her head. "It's the most beautiful Mehendi I've ever seen," she chuckled softly.

I wiped her tears gently. "Then why are you crying?"

She smiled again but shook her head slowly. "Because it all feels like a dream. You came into my life and changed everything. You make me laugh. You make me feel things I didn't want to feel, yet crave them. And I'm afraid that one day I'll wake up... and it will all vanish." Her voice cracked.

I leaned in and pressed my lips gently to hers, sucking lightly on her lower lip before shaking my head.

"It's not a dream, Aishwarya. This is your life now. A new beginning, where you get to discover yourself, with everything else left in the past. It's us against the world."

She smiled through her tears. "Us," she repeated softly, then lowered her head again to my chest.

I stroked her hair gently.

Then, in a hoarse whisper, she murmured, "But I'm afraid of going to hell."

I furrowed my brow. "Why would you say that?"

She took a deep breath, locking her eyes with mine once more. "Because you made me lie," she confessed softly. "And I'm afraid now."

A faint smile curved my lips as I leaned in. "Do you want me to do what you lied about?"

She didn't answer immediately. Her gaze lingered on mine, then she gave the slightest nod.

A sudden rush of heat crawled up my spine. I bit my lower lip, containing the surge.

“But...” she said almost instantly.

“But?” I coaxed gently.

Her lashes lowered. “I just... don’t want you to see me. Like... there.”

I blinked, confused at first, until the meaning behind her words slowly came into focus.

Perhaps she was hesitant, or shy, or maybe she wasn’t yet ready.

Understanding her unspoken plea, I softened and reached up to caress her head, brushing my fingers tenderly through her hair.

“Alright,” I whispered. “But now, you must go back to sleep.”

She nodded groggily and laid her head once again on my chest.

With her warmth enveloping me and her breath calm against my skin, I, too, drifted off to sleep.



21 Aishwarya

I woke up when I had slept enough to contend with my dreams. My lashes fluttered open slowly and landed on his sleeping face, turned toward mine.

We were still on the small couch, which had somehow held both of us through the night.

My hand rested on his chest. I quickly pulled back and sighed in relief. Thankfully, Mehendi hadn't left any marks. It had dried.

I slowly detached myself from him, but the light chime of my anklets made him sigh in his sleep and inhale deeply.

I sat upright, my lower back brushing against his midriff. I began rubbing my palms together, trying to rid them of the dried Mehendi still sticking to my skin.

As the flakes fell away, the actual colour revealed itself.

"Oh my goodness," I breathed. I had never seen Mehendi turn this dark before.

"What happened?" His slow, sleepy voice caught my attention. I turned my gaze to him.

His eyes remained closed as he wrapped his arms around me, gently pulling me back toward him. I relaxed into him again, and he drew closer.

But I immediately leaned away and said, "I'm fasting, Hukum."

He inhaled deeply, tinged with a sigh of mild frustration, and a small smile tugged at my lips.

"Fine," he muttered, his eyes only half-open.

He lazily kissed my cheek, and I giggled softly. "I have to get up and get ready," I said, trying to push him away just a little.

He let go of me, and I stood up from the couch. Before I could say more, he was already drifting back into sleep.

"You should go to bed," I said softly, but he was already gone. I smiled, watching him, then glanced down at my hands again.

I didn't know why, but they made me smile. The design was so beautiful.

I glanced at his hands and saw that the tips of his fingers also had stains, smudged with traces of Mehendi.

He is the best.

I smiled to myself and walked into the bathroom.

It took a good while to freshen up, bathe, and get ready. I chose a red lehenga for the day. It was my first **Teej** after the wedding, and red felt both sacred and perfect for the occasion.

After wearing the lehenga and blouse, I stood before the mirror. That's when I remembered my jewellery was still on the table.

He had taken it off the previous night while I slept.

I walked to the table and glanced at him, still sleeping. "Hukum," I called softly, picking up my earrings and putting them on.

"Hmm?" he replied groggily.

"I think you should get up," I said gently. He took a deep breath and slowly opened his eyes.

"Really?" he asked sleepily.

"Ji," I nodded.

He stretched his arms wide and reached toward my waist playfully. I stepped back just out of his reach.

He chuckled, and I smiled.

He watched me for a moment, and I couldn't stop staring at his beautiful morning face. Somehow, he looked even more handsome.

I quickly put on the rest of the jewellery and walked back to the mirror to adjust my dupatta.

He stood up from the couch and ran his fingers through his hair, making sure I could see his reflection in the mirror.

Then, he walked into the bathroom. After I finished getting ready, I followed him inside for a moment.

He was sitting on the stone stool, covered on his lower half. He looked up at me just as I entered.

"Hukum," I called softly.

Without a word, he emptied a small vessel of water over his head, soaking himself. His lashes and brows darkened with the water, and for a moment, my heartbeat surged uncontrollably.

"Ji?" he asked.

I swallowed before answering. "Umm... I'm going for the prayers. If you need anything, let the attendants know."

He nodded. "Okay."

I blinked once, then repeated, "Okay."

Turning around, I walked out of the bathroom. But the image of him sitting there, wet, haunted my mind for a moment longer than it should have. I shook my head.

I should be thinking about God.

Taking a deep breath, I collected myself and walked out of my chamber, heading toward the prayer hall where everyone was waiting.

I stepped into the prayer hall and saw all my sisters already gathered, dressed in red for the Teej rituals.

"Aishwarya," one of them called out, and I walked toward her. "Show us your Mehendi?" she asked. I smiled and held out my hands. Their eyes widened, followed quickly by gasps.

"Oh my God, you cheated," one of my sisters said, immediately grabbing my hands. "You made yours more beautiful than ours, and it's so dark!"

I laughed lightly. "No, Jiji, I didn't do it. I was too tired after applying Mehendi on all your hands... so Hukum did it."

There was a moment of silence before one of them chuckled. "What?"

A few more laughed. "Your husband?"

"Ji," I answered softly.

“What kind of husband does that? What is he? A half-man?” One of them sneered, and suddenly, I felt a wave of anger rush inside me.

“No. Actually, he’s a full man. Spend a night with him and you’ll know,” I snapped without thinking.

And suddenly, the sting of my elder sister’s slap caught me off guard.

“Absurd,” she hissed, eyeing me from head to toe.

My heart pounded as tears welled up in my eyes, threatening to spill. But I blinked them back, determined not to show weakness.

What did I say wrong?

They should spend time with him. He’s the best man I’ve ever known. He supported me more than they ever had in my entire life.

“I said nothing wrong,” I said quietly. “If you spend time with him, you’ll understand. You’re judging him without knowing him.”

She inhaled sharply, flaring her nostrils. “We don’t need to spend time with your husband. Understand that. Whatever he is, we don’t care. And what has he even done for you? It hasn’t even been a month since your wedding, and you’re already turning against us for him? For that man?”

Her words pierced something deep within me.

“We are your sisters, Aishwarya! What has he given you? Ornaments? Status? Power? Don’t forget, he’s just an advisor. He holds no real power. You think you know what a real man is? Look at our husbands, they are kings.”

My heart was thudding so wildly, I could hardly hear anything else. Blood rushed in my ears, and my breathing shallowed. I didn’t know why, but this slap hurt more than before.

And yet... I swallowed it down. I didn’t need to answer them. They’d never understand.

I lowered my gaze.

“Nothing,” I whispered, closing my eyes, silently asking for forgiveness from Maa Gauri. I was fasting for her. *I shouldn't lose my temper.* “I’m sorry, Jiji... if I hurt you.”

With that, I walked past them and began my prayers.

My heart felt heavy, as if walking a tightrope over a cliff. I prayed to Maa Gauri not for wealth or victory, but for strength.

Strength not to fight battles for kingdoms... but to be happy. Because somehow, being happy has become the hardest thing of all.

When the prayers were over, I quietly returned to my chamber and sat on the edge of the bed. My eyes wandered, searching... but the room felt empty.

Hukum wasn't here.

I let out a shaky breath and lie back.

Suddenly, I heard footsteps approaching.

“Are you back after the prayers?” he asked, his voice growing louder as he neared.

“Yes,” I said, gulping the tightness in my throat.

He must have heard the strain in it. “What happened?”

“Nothing.”

He came closer and lay beside me on his back, facing the ceiling.

“Something happened,” he said again gently. “Did you cry? Did someone say something?”

The more he asked, the harder it became to hold back.

I shook my head and blinked away the pooling tears.

“Swatantrata kya hai, Hukum?” (What is freedom, Hukum?) I asked quietly.

He remained still for a moment before answering, “Depends on what you feel bound by.” His words made me pause.

What was it truly that bound me?

“What makes you feel bound, Aishwarya?” he asked.

“I think...there are many things,” I replied.

He shifted, propping his head up on his palm as he looked at me.

“Like what?” I looked at him, thinking.

“Do you think that having an identity of my own will help me feel free?”

He took a slow breath and nodded. “Having an identity and voice of your own will definitely make you feel powerful and liberated,” he said softly. “But it doesn’t guarantee freedom. Anything beyond necessity is slavery, Aishwarya. Before achieving anything, you must define your limits. Beyond those limits, even success can become a trap. Being too agreeable, or not agreeable at all, both are weaknesses.”

He paused, then added, “But if you ask me... I would always want you to have your own identity. Like Aishwarya, Princess of Songarh and Suryagarh. Not just Aishwarya Ranvijay Dev Singh.”

His words sank deep into me. My sister’s slap echoed again in my mind. It wasn’t just a physical sting; it was the weight of being told that being myself, being his wife, wasn’t enough.

I looked at him. “I think I’m ready for the business idea you gave me. I’ll do it.”

He sat up so fast.

“WHAT?????” he shouted, immediately stepping out of bed. I chuckled, watching his shocked, excited face.

Sometimes, flowery words can’t awaken what’s buried deep inside you. But a single slap can.

“Yes,” I nodded, and he pulled me up, making me stand with him.

“Really??” he asked again, joyously.

I nodded lightly, though part of me still felt unsure of how I’d actually do it. But before I could overthink, he suddenly lifted me into his arms and squealed with joy.

“Oh my goodness!”

His happiness was infectious, and I laughed as he spun us around. I instinctively wrapped my arms around his neck to steady myself.

"Hukum!" I exclaimed breathlessly, and he gently put me down.

My heart was racing, and I placed a hand on my chest, feeling its wild thumping.

"Come with me," he said suddenly, grabbing my wrist. "I want to show you something."

I laughed softly. "But what?"

"Somewhere," he said playfully, and we walked out together, heading toward the tree garden behind the chambers.

The sky was cloudy, and the breeze was soft against my skin. Broken, dried leaves from the recent rains carpeted the damp grass. It was quiet, yet alive with the rustling of trees and the calls of distant birds.

"Where are we going?" I asked, but he gave me a look that said, 'Just keep walking.'

Then suddenly, I saw a swing hanging from the thick branch of a massive tree. I gasped and laughed. I had never seen it before.

"You made it?" I asked, wonder-struck.

He smiled. ***"Bina jhule ke Saawan ka kya anand?"***
(What is Saawan without swings?)

I chuckled and ran toward it. The ropes were thick and tightly knotted, with a wide wooden plank serving as the base, sturdy enough to support two.

"You climbed the tree to tie it?"

"Yes," he said, coming closer, gently guiding me to sit.

My feet dangled almost a foot above the ground, and I couldn't stop laughing. I gripped the ropes and looked up at him as he brushed a strand of hair from my cheek.

"Did something happen, Aishwarya?" he asked softly.

I blinked and tried not to let my smile falter. "No," I whispered, and he nodded, offering a faint smile in return.

He stepped behind me and gave the swing a gentle push. I burst into laughter as the motion tickled my stomach.

"Hahaha!"

He slowly increased the speed, and with it, my laughter grew louder. For once, there was no one telling me, 'Don't laugh so loud.'

"Aishwarya," he called suddenly, giving me another push. "You know lying or hiding something will also send you to hell."

My laughter faded slightly. "Yes, I know," I murmured.

"Then tell me what you're hiding."

The swing soared higher, my anklets and bangles chimed with every motion. I lowered my gaze.

"When I went to the prayer hall..." I began slowly. "Jiji asked me to show her my mehendi. She said I cheated because mine was darker and more beautiful than theirs. I told her I didn't do it myself, that you did. And then she... she said horrible things about you."

"What did she say?" he asked in a calm voice.

"She said... what kind of husband does that? That you must be a half-man."

He burst into laughter. "Really?" he said, still chuckling.

I exhaled shakily, unsure whether I should feel relieved or embarrassed.

"Yes. It hurt me a lot," I admitted.

"And what did you say to her?" he asked, still smiling.

I blinked and hesitated before answering. "I said you're not a half-man... I told her to spend a night with you to find out."

He stopped laughing.

"What?? What the hell did you say?" he repeated, his voice laced with both shock and disbelief.

I lowered my gaze, feeling guilty.

"I meant she doesn't know you. If she spent time with you, she'd understand. And since you're busy during the day... night made sense."

He stepped closer as the swing slowed. He took hold of the ropes, stopping it gently. For a moment, he said nothing. Then, silently, he sat beside me and took my hand in his.

"You shouldn't say that. I'm only your husband, and I will spend my nights and days only and only with you," he said softly, and I nodded.

"Yes. I realised that... after a slap," I murmured.

"She slapped you?" he asked sharply, surprised, and I nodded.

"She did," I admitted, and he gently brushed the back of my hand with his thumb.

"It's okay. Don't feel bad. My Bhai-sa slaps me sometimes too," he said lightly.

I shook my head. "I'm not feeling bad about the slap... but she shouldn't have said such things about you. That hurt me."

He looked at me and smiled. "I wonder if you would've killed her if you had a sword in your hand back then. You looked that angry."

I laughed. "You know I'd never hurt anyone."

He nodded slowly. "Yes. That's exactly why you're special to me, Aishwarya."

The swing shifted gently under us as he moved it with his foot.

"I think they just don't understand you," I said quietly. "Maybe because they've never had a man like you, Hukum. And I don't know whether I should feel bad for myself or for them. They're judging you because they've never witnessed someone like you. I feel bad... that they don't have someone who supports them or praises their talents."

He nodded thoughtfully. "That's true, Aishwarya. You don't know how many women live their entire lives under the shadow of their husbands, never knowing what freedom tastes like, never knowing what their own heartbeat feels like. My mother... she lived that way for a while, and it broke her before she ever learned what life really was."

He looked at me and said firmly, "When you start the business, women will come. They'll be able to earn a living for themselves and establish an identity. Not just for you, but for them. And for them, you should take this chance."

I nodded slowly, leaning my head on his shoulder as we swung gently together in silence. The breeze whispered around us, and the garden felt so peaceful.

He leaned down and pressed a soft kiss to my forehead. "But I still feel bad that she slapped you. She shouldn't have. You're my wife now."

I smiled faintly and squeezed his hand. "It's okay. It was my mistake. I shouldn't have spoken to her like that."

He made me face him and asked, "What do you think is the best way to avenge a slap on my wife's cheek?"

I laughed. "No, Hukum, there's no need for that."

He clenched his jaw, shaking his head. "I'm not sparing her like that."

Leaning in, he kissed my cheek.

"Please, Hukum... don't do anything. You already made them cook today. They must be struggling in the kitchen while fasting."

He smirked. "I don't know... I'm quite possessive about a few things in my life."

I raised a brow. "I'm not a thing, Hukum."

He smiled. "It's a metaphor, baby."

I smiled too, eyes flickering to his lips.

"Ah, don't look at me like that, Aishwarya. I don't want to make you commit any sin today," he teased, and I laughed softly.

"Are you feeling sick again?" I asked slyly, and he narrowed his brows.

"Sick?"

"Yes... sick. You remember? My touch?" I said it in a teasing whisper, and he lowered his gaze with a small smile.

"That's a secret, Aishwarya. Don't bring it up now." Then, suddenly, he looked into my eyes again. "Well, your use of

the word 'sick' is a metaphor too, in your condition."

I frowned. "What? What do you mean?"

Before he could answer, a soft voice interrupted us. "Bai-sa, Rajaji is asking for both of you."

I turned to see a young girl standing a little distance away.

"Coming," Hukum replied, standing from the swing and gently pulling my hand with him.

"What are they doing?" I asked the attendant.

"It's a celebration," she said. "They're expecting you to dance."

I looked at Hukum, alarmed. "I don't dance," I told her firmly.

"We are coming," he said, and she turned and walked away.

"But, Hukum, I don't want to go..." I murmured, but he wrapped his arm gently around my shoulder and kissed my cheek.

"Then we'll just watch others dance," he said.

I sighed and nodded. "Okay."

"And maybe," he said, grinning, "I'll see you dance."

"But I don't dance," I repeated.

"That's a lie," he teased. "I've seen you humming and grooving alone."

I bit my lower lip, blushing, and dropped my gaze as we began walking toward the celebration hall.

The walk was slow and filled with small, silly exchanges. When we finally stepped inside, the room was already buzzing with everyone present.

I looked toward my sisters instinctively. Hukum must've noticed because he smiled.

"Please, Hukum... don't do anything to them," I whispered.

He just smiled. "I'm not promising anything."

"But they're my sisters," I said.

He grinned. "Mishaps happen, Aishwarya."



22 Ranvijay

She looked at me nervously, with worry etched all over her face.

“Hukum, please,” she whispered, and I bit my lower lip to calm the mischievous thoughts rushing through my mind.

I didn’t know why, but suddenly thousands of ideas were swirling in my head to teach them a lesson.

“Please have a seat,” her father said, gesturing toward an empty couch. I smiled at him.

Even though I had disliked him, his behaviour towards us since we arrived was making me reconsider. Perhaps he had a reason for what he once tried to do.

“Ji,” I said softly, and we both silently took our seats on the couch.

I could feel her tense gaze on me as I looked ahead at the dancers performing in the middle of the celebration hall. They were singing traditional folk songs, and the movement felt deeply nostalgic.

Growing up, we hadn’t seen much of this, but a few such moments had occurred in Suryagarh since Bhai-sa had taken over.

I looked to where her sisters were sitting, watching us from the corners of their eyes while whispering among themselves. I smiled, kept my gaze ahead on the dancers, and held Aishwarya’s hand.

She startled slightly at my touch, and I turned to her. “Is something wrong, Aishwarya?” I asked softly.

She looked at me and blinked, then shook her head lightly. “They might... watch us,” she whispered.

I narrowed my brow. “Well, we’re a newlywed couple. Let them watch. We’re the centre of attention,” I said.

She inhaled deeply, still clearly uncomfortable, and I could sense her hesitation just by how her hand felt in mine.

“Should I let go of your hand?” I asked gently.

There was a brief pause before she shook her head slowly. “No,” she muttered, turning her gaze to the women dancing before us.

I smiled. Her shy little gestures always caught me off guard. She looked radiant. Her eyes sparkled, her cheeks glowed, and she was beaming with happiness.

And happiness... is a jewel of its own. When you wear it, nothing else can overpower you.

Suddenly, the tempo of the music changed. It became more lively and playful, and the dancers began pulling the women nearby onto the floor to join them. One of them came toward Aishwarya and tried to bring her in.

“No,” she said with a polite smile, clutching my hand even tighter.

The dancer gently persisted, but respectfully. I gave a small shake of my head, and the dancer stepped away with a smile.

I saw Aishwarya blinking at her sisters, who were already dancing. I stood up from the couch, still holding her hand. She looked at me in confusion, and I gave a slight nod, asking her to come with me.

She hesitated for a moment, then laughed a little out of nervousness and followed me.

We stepped down together. The music echoed loudly, drums and instruments resonated across the hall. The joy was infectious.

I nudged her forward towards the circle of spinning dancers. She giggled and joined in.

I stepped back, watching her. Her laughter, her graceful movements, and her tiny waist swaying to the beat were all enchanting.

As she spun closer, I reached for one of my ***mala*** beads discreetly. I tugged it gently until it broke, and the pearls spilt into my palm.

She was laughing, twirling, and moving between dancers and sisters.

When she passed near me again, I took her hand gently, just for balance, and subtly released the beads onto the floor. No one even noticed.

Within moments, chaos followed.

Loud cries rang out as her sisters started slipping across the floor one after the other.

I tried to hide my smile.

Perfect.

Aishwarya turned to me with wide, shocked eyes, and I immediately wiped the smile from my face.

"I didn't do that," I said innocently, blinking my eyes. Her mouth opened in disbelief. "Are you okay?" I added quickly, pretending concern.

She stared at me speechlessly.

Their husbands rushed over to help them, but the beads had done their job well. Even they slipped with a loud thud.

I couldn't stop the grin tugging at my lips.

I glanced at Aishwarya, who still looked stunned. "I promise I didn't do that. The beads... they just fell by mistake," I said with exaggerated innocence.

She shook her head slowly, moving her eyes to her sisters sprawled on the ground.

She took a step forward, and just like that, she slipped too.

But I was quick enough to catch her by the waist and pull her into me. "Careful," I whispered, trying hard not to smile again.

Her eyes widened even more, and I immediately lifted her in my arms, carefully taking a few steps back. "Put me down, Hukum," she hissed, and I gently placed her back on her feet.

All around us, people were rushing to help, moving out of the hall in confusion. The air was filled with people's painful cries and curses.

I looked at Aishwarya. She looked sad. Very sad.

"Come with me," I said, taking her hand to guide her safely through the crowd. She followed silently, and I brought her back to our chamber.

She let out a deep breath and looked at me. "You shouldn't have done that, Hukum. They're hurt now," she said.

I sat down on the bed and replied, "Yes, I shouldn't have done that. They just fell to the ground. I should've planned something bi—"

She stopped me mid-sentence by pressing her palm against my mouth and shook her head. "This is so childish," she scolded, and I narrowed my brows slightly.

I just stared at her face. She looked beautiful even when angry. She wasn't furious, but I could feel her unhappiness.

Slowly, I moved her hand off my mouth and gently pulled her to sit beside me.

"I'm sorry if I hurt you. But they deserved it. This was the least," I said sincerely. A line of worry creased her forehead. I took her hand in mine. "You shouldn't worry about them right now. Let's just rest," I suggested.

She rolled her eyes at me. I knew she wanted to scold me, but she was holding herself back.

"I think I should check on my sisters, Hukum," she said, standing up.

"I think you shouldn't," I said, holding her forearm.

She turned to look at me. "Why? They're my sisters."

"Yes, they are. But they don't treat you like one," I replied, pulling her closer. "They need to learn how to behave, how to respect. No one deserves the way they treat you. And you know it, Aishwarya, they're toxic."

She frowned slightly. "Toxic?"

"Yes," I said. "They deceive you, mistreat you. They laugh at your insecurities. And laughter alone isn't the problem; pushing someone deeper into the well of their insecurities is. That's also toxicity."

She blinked slowly.

"They don't deserve someone like you. She slapped you and didn't even come to speak with you after that. And now she's the one who's hurt. I don't think you should go to her."

"But then what would be the difference between them and me? If I behave the same way?" she asked.

"It's not the same, Aishwarya," I said gently. "You're not treating them the way they treat you. You're simply choosing to respect your own peace, space, and boundaries. If you want them to respect you, you must first respect yourself."

I paused before continuing, "If you truly care and want to go check on your sister, then go. But if you're only thinking about what they'll think if you don't, then don't go."

She took a deep breath, slumping her shoulders. Then slowly, she rested her head on my shoulder. "It's complicated," she whispered, closing her eyes.

I smiled at her. I couldn't help it. She was beautiful even when sad.

Then she suddenly asked, "Have you had lunch? I think you skipped it."

I looked at her with mild amusement. *She noticed.*

"I... haven't," I said honestly.

She narrowed her brow. "Why not? Are you fasting for your husband?" she playfully asked, and I chuckled.

"I'm not fasting," I said softly. "But I wasn't feeling like eating. I wanted to eat with you."

She smiled. "Okay. We'll eat in the evening," she stated.

"You should take some rest. I'll be back in a while," she added, standing up.

I knew she couldn't stop herself from checking on them.

I smiled and nodded. "Okay. But if they say anything stupid again, just remind them that I carry my sword... and that you're now Aishwarya Ranvijay Dev Singh."

She laughed softly. "Ji, Hukum. I know who I am," she said with a teasing tone.

I bit my lower lip at her tone. Her teasing always lit something within me. I nodded as she turned and walked away.

I grabbed a book and started reading.

By now, I had already sent my personal secret agents to look into the matter.

I still didn't know the names of the traitors or anything solid about them. And until I had obvious information, I couldn't inform Bhai-sa. He would worry unnecessarily.

Though I had already written to Agastya.

Agastya was the sharpest of the three of us. Bhai-sa was the strongest in terms of physical power and authority. I had my strengths in history, politics, and strategic manipulation. But Agastya was unmatched when it came to information.

He usually kept a childish façade, smiling charmingly and fooling everyone. But inside, he was a wall; he heard everything, noticed everything. He never missed a detail.

His memory was sharp as steel, and he had connections all across the Indira.

Thanks to his friendly nature, he made friends easily, and girlfriends even more so. With just one smile, women would open up to him, revealing whatever secrets they knew.

He could get the information we needed quickly and efficiently.

I could've gone myself, but that would've required travel. And I was needed more in the Kingdom.

I continued reading the book late into the night. Aishwarya returned after darkness had fallen.

"How are they?" I asked as soon as she stepped into the chamber.

"I guess one has a broken bone," she said, and I let out a short laugh immediately.

"Wow."

She gave me a sharp, anguished look and sat beside me.

"You shouldn't have done that, Hukum," she breathed, eyeing the book in my hands.

“Yes, you’ve told me that at least a hundred times since the afternoon,” I replied, glancing at her.

She narrowed her eyes at me but then asked in a softer tone, “What are you reading, Hukum?”

I turned the book slightly and looked at the cover. “Umm... It’s the history of Southern Indira,” I said.

“Southern Indira?” she repeated, frowning.

I nodded just as an attendant entered the chamber with a plate of food.

“Bai-sa, dinner,” she said politely.

Aishwarya immediately stood and took the plate from her hands. “Thank you so much. Please make sure all my sisters eat well,” she told her gently.

“Ji, Bai-sa,” the attendant said and left.

Aishwarya placed the plate on the table.

“No dining hall dinner today?” I asked with a slight smile.

“Yes. All thanks to you, everyone’s stuck in bed,” she said with a little bite, but her voice held a teasing note.

“You’re welcome,” I replied, and she laughed softly.

She looked different tonight, as she was both soft and composed.

I closed the book and set it aside. Shifting closer, I gently wrapped my arm around her waist.

Her smile widened shyly at the gesture.

“Have you broken your fast?” I asked.

She looked at me and nodded. “Ji.” She turned back to the food, ready to serve.

I leaned in and pressed a kiss to her shoulder.

She let out a quiet sigh at my touch and turned to look at me. “The food is getting cold,” she whispered.

I lowered my lips to the base of her neck and kissed her again.

“I know. That’s why I’m warming it up.”



23 Aishwarya

I felt a slight uneasiness stirring between us.

As I looked at him, his eyes had that lazy, unfocused depth I had come to recognise.

He lifted his gaze from the base of my neck, and I caught the glint of his tongue licking across his lower lip. His lips looked glossier, flushed with a deeper shade of pink.

“Hukum...” I breathed, glancing toward the food.

He smiled at me subtly and knowingly. “Ji,” he replied, and I swallowed hard.

For a moment, I thought... he wasn’t talking about the food. He shifted his gaze to the plate, and I exhaled quietly.

Right. He is talking about the food.

I knew that. Why would he talk about me as if I were... food? He wouldn’t eat me.

I laughed internally, embarrassed at my own racing thoughts, and drew in a deep breath to settle myself.

“Shall we start?” I asked softly.

He sucked his lower lip and gave a nod. “Yes. After you.”

I smiled a little and reached forward to make a bite. But as I lifted the food, I felt his intense, unwavering gaze on me.

His arm was still around my waist, and his face had tilted slightly toward me. A faint smile played on his lips while his eyes locked with mine.

I was genuinely nervous.

He lifted his brow, and I gulped as tension coiled low in my belly.

Slowly, I brought the food to my mouth and took a bite, lowering my gaze. I chewed carefully, making no sound, trying not to choke on my own heartbeat.

I dared to look at him again, but his gaze hadn’t shifted.

Suddenly, my knees grew weak, as if blood had drained from my head, and my thoughts became scattered.

“Hukum, aap humein aise na dekhiye,” (Hukum, please don’t look at me like that.) I said in a soft, pleading voice, staring at him.

Even so, his gaze remained fixed. There was no reaction. He stayed absolutely still.

I shut my eyes briefly, trying to calm the fluttering within. My hunger had vanished completely.

“Okay... as you ask,” he finally said in a low murmur and shifted his gaze.

He reached for the plate and tore a bite of food, bringing it to me. I bit my lower lip and leaned in, accepting the food from his hand.

“You’re looking beautiful,” he said gently.

“You always say that,” I replied with a shy smile.

He leaned in closer and pressed his lips slightly against my ear, brushing the skin.

“Hukum...” I giggled, lightly swatting him away with my shoulder. He turned back to the food with a teasing smile.

I took another bite, and so did he.

He leaned in again and planted a kiss on my cheek, and I let out a breath of laughter.

“I’m hungry,” I said softly.

“Alright, finish it quickly,” he replied with a smile.

“What then?” I asked mid-chew.

He tore another bite. “We’ll make sure you don’t go to hell,” he said with a low, teasing tone.

And just like that, his lips weren’t on the food in my imagination anymore. Beginning on my back, they then positioned themselves right above me, on my bare shoulders, and slowly proceeded to descend to my stomach, before dropping lower to my legs, lightly skimming my thighs, and finally, my... chest. And then my core...

I swallowed, internally shaking my head as though that would eliminate the thoughts, and looked at him.

He was still watching me intently, looking away only when the food required his attention. I tried to focus, but after

only a few more bites, I blurted, "I think I'm full."

He looked at me and leaned in slightly. I stared into his eyes as he murmured slowly, "I don't think you're full. You're very...very empty."

My stomach twisted violently, and a sudden warmth pooled low in my body.

What is he doing to me?

I had seeds in the morning, but clearly, it wasn't working.

"Huku—"

"Shhh..." he hushed me gently, lowering his voice again. "You should be full... until you can't even move an inch."

A shiver ran straight down my spine, and I lowered my gaze, completely disarmed. I knew he was not talking about the food.

"You're not... talking about the food, are you?" I whispered, lifting my eyes slowly to meet his.

Darkness had crept into the chamber with the night. Shadows clung to the corners, and the cool air stirred goosebumps on my skin.

He inhaled sharply and smiled suddenly. "Have a few more bites," he said, stepping away from the couch and standing up.

"Sit with me," I said softly.

He paused, then turned back to me. "Okay," he said, and after a momentary pause, sat beside me again.

My gaze drifted down to the plate again, and I had a few more bites until I was genuinely full.

He just stared silently at me while I was eating.

"You look so beautiful while eating," he said, and I immediately choked on the water I was drinking.

Coughs burst from my mouth, and he let out a soft laugh. "Oh, my baby," he murmured, gently patting my back.

After a moment, the coughing stopped.

There was something different about him today.

I took a deep breath and stood up from the couch. "I should go and hand over this plate to the attendant," I said,

picking it up.

I walked away, trying to catch my breath and calm the storm building inside me. My legs felt shaky, and my mind tangled in wild thoughts.

His words kept repeating in my head. *You look so beautiful while eating.*

It sounded harmless, but somehow, it wasn't.

I handed the plate to an attendant outside the chamber and took a deep breath, pressing my hand against my chest.

What am I even feeling?

The thought of him touching every inch of me was making me feel things I couldn't understand.

My body was responding. It wanted something I couldn't explain. And yet... my mind wasn't prepared. My sanity wasn't ready.

I closed my eyes and stepped down the stairs of the chamber.

A loud clap of thunder cracked through the sky, making me shiver, and I looked north.

The sky was dark and dense with clouds.

It's going to rain.

The torches lining the corridor flickered in the wind, guiding my way.

I crossed my arms tightly over my chest, trying to keep warm as a chilly breeze wrapped around me. And then it began to rain.

Cold droplets hit my skin, soaking me within moments, and I closed my eyes.

Memories of meeting him for the first time, him pressing his lips to my feet, his eyes on me in the dressing room, the golden bangles clinking on my wrists, the softness in his voice when he spoke to me, the touch of his lips on my neck... the way his hand had explored my chest, the way I had touched him, flooded me.

The memory of it all was enough to set my entire body ablaze despite the cold. It was as if I was craving his touch, yet trembling in fear of what it would do to me. The sensations lingered inside me like a fever that refused to go.

"Aishwarya," his voice pulled me back into the moment. I turned and saw him standing a few steps away, already drenched in the rain. "What are you doing out here? You'll get sick," he said softly.

My breath caught as I looked at him. He was drenched, and his kurta clung to his chest and arms. And his eyes looked right through me. The seeds weren't helping. That feeling was back again.

I lowered my gaze. "Hukum..." I breathed.

As he stepped toward me, tears welled in my eyes. I took a step back, pressing my spine against the tree trunk behind me.

"I'm not feeling right, Hukum," I whispered. "And I'm afraid this closeness... will make it worse."

He stopped just a few feet away.

The rain dripped from my lashes as warm tears slid down my cheeks. I didn't even know why I was crying.

"Don't think about right or wrong, Aishwarya," he said gently.

"No... you're not understanding me," I said, shaking my head. "Something's wrong with me."

He moved closer slowly. His palm pressed beside me on the tree, and with his other hand, he lifted my chin. "Hey... look at me." His voice calmed something deep inside me. Even in the dark, I could see his eyes, glimmering with warmth.

"Tell me what you're talking about."

I took a sharp breath as the words rushed from a place I barely understood.

"I feel... I feel my insides shiver whenever you come close to me. Your words make me feel... ooze up. Your eyes... they make me weak, Hukum. I don't feel normal when

you're near. You know... when you touched me on my chest, I felt like I couldn't breathe. This isn't normal, Hukum. Even the seeds are not helping. And now you're going to kiss me everywhere, and I'm afraid... I'll feel even sicker. I fear hell. I shouldn't have lied."

My heart was pounding so wildly I thought it would burst.

He stepped closer again, cupping my cheek as I closed my eyes. His warmth soothed me through the cold rain.

"It's normal, Aishwarya," he said softly.

I opened my eyes and immediately shook my head. "No... it's not. I think I'm not good for you," my voice broke with each word.

He stepped even closer, making my breath hitch.

"You're the best for me. Just as you feel when I come closer, I feel the same around you. The sensations, the shivers... everything. It's absolutely normal. Tell me, do you feel this for anyone else?"

"No," I said instantly.

"You're unaware of a lot of things, my baby. That's why you think this is wrong. But once you understand the reason for these sensations... and the fruit of them... you'll crave it."

Fruit of the sensations?

I blinked and looked up.

He nodded. "Yes... But tell me first, do you feel good or bad when it happens?" he asked in a slow voice, and I gulped nervously.

"Good... but I'm afraid. You know, once it starts, I don't know how it will end," I tried to explain.

He gently caressed my lower lip with his thumb. "Aishwarya," he breathed softly. "Do you want to know how it ends?" he asked.

I nodded, almost whispering, "Ji..."

He leaned in closer, so slowly that I felt every beat of my racing heart echo in my ears. The goosebumps along my

arms rose sharply, and my lashes felt too heavy to stay open. His warm breath grazed my ear.

“Do you feel something between your legs?” he asked in a slow whisper. And the moment he said it, I did. A fire ignited inside me, spreading like wildfire through my veins.

“Yes... I’ve never felt this way before meeting you, Hukum,” I confessed, barely able to speak.

As he exhaled near my ear, his breath tickled the delicate skin and whispered, “When I touch you in your sensitive place... you’ll feel sensations, shivers, a thousand things all at once. You’ll feel like something is taking over you... like you’re losing control, losing your senses to my touch,”

His hands slowly slid down to my wrists, tracing my bangles, and he continued. “And when those sensations reach their peak... you’ll feel a release. It’ll leave you breathless... with ecstasy. It will feel like something inside you has shaken loose. You’ll release for me, baby.”

His words wrapped around me like heat in the cold rain. A tremor ran through me, and I swallowed hard before asking, “Is that... wrong, Hukum?”

He pressed a soft kiss to my ear and whispered, “Did it feel wrong... when you touched me?”

I immediately shook my head and placed my hand on his chest. “No,” I said.

“You don’t have to worry about it, Aishwarya. Just don’t fall for my words. Understand when you want to feel the peak, when you want to seek the end. Understand?”

I bit my lower lip and noticed the rain had stopped.

He took a step back and said, “I think you should go inside and change before you catch a cold.”

I immediately asked, “Aren’t you coming inside?”

He took a few more steps away from me and shook his head lightly. “I’ll take a short walk. Alone,” he said.

“Are you upset with me, Hukum?” I asked softly.

“No,” he replied almost immediately,

My heart was racing wildly. "Are you sure? I'm sorry," I said, stepping closer to him.

He smiled, then stepped forward and cupped my cheeks with both hands.

He kissed my forehead lovingly and said, "Go inside and change."

I nodded. "Ji."

I felt a strange ache in my chest as I walked away from him. Each step felt heavier than the last. I turned to look back.

He was already walking away into the woods. I swallowed hard and quietly stepped inside the chamber.

Water dripped from my soaked clothes as I walked. Each drop stirred thousands of feelings I couldn't name. I clenched my fists in my lehenga and walked straight into the bathroom.

Stripping off my wet clothes, I sat down on the bathing stool and poured a few jars of water over myself, rinsing off the rain.

I lowered my gaze to my naked body. My nipples were hard. My core... felt uneasy. His words were still echoing in my mind.

I watched the water slide down my midriff, down through the soft gap between my thighs. I sucked on my lower lip and slowly brought my hand to my thigh. My fingers moved hesitantly, but, surprisingly, I felt nothing.

I closed my eyes and imagined his touch, not mine.

A spark rushed through my body, and I opened my eyes abruptly.

What the hell am I thinking?

I palmed my face. *God... I'm losing my mind.*

His voice, his breath, the things he said... I couldn't stop thinking. That release he spoke of... that peak...

I felt a different kind of wetness between my legs. It wasn't water, nor was it urine.

It had happened to me so many times whenever he got close, only to fade when he left.

“Argh,” I grumbled softly, clenching my fists and staring at the water jars.

I poured a few more over myself, then stood up and wrapped my body and hair in towels.

I was cold and confused and completely overwhelmed.

Once dressed in the soft, white lehenga I usually wore at night, I let the wet strands fall below my hips, allowing them to dry.

Then I heard the soft, faded sound of water running in the bathroom.

He has returned.

I looked at myself in the mirror, draped the dupatta across my chest, and tucked the other end into my waistband.

A part of me was terrified, and another part was dying to know what he meant by those words.

Release... ecstasy... fruit of sensation...

I pressed my hands to my face. *It'd be too much.*

Still, something in me craved it. I feared his touch... and yet was desperate for it at the same time.

I sucked on my lower lip and began running my fingers through my wet hair, still aware of the water's sound.

As it stopped, my heart leapt.

I turned toward the door just as Hukum stepped in, half-naked.

The chamber was dark except for a few flickering lamps. Their soft glow cast his shadow across the floor, highlighting one side of his face.

He raised his brows at me. I lowered my gaze and slowly shook my head in response to the question in his eyes.

He didn't smile this time, just walked silently to the trunk and pulled out a fresh pair of clothes.

I clenched my fingers on the fabric of my lehenga and turned to leave the chamber. The bells on my anklets echoed with every step.

He lifted his eyes to me again, and my heart began racing all over again.

“Are you okay?” he asked in a soft voice.

I stopped near him and nodded. “Ji.”

But my feet wouldn’t move.

He nodded lightly and said in a low tone, “You should go to sleep. It’s late.”

His words left a dull ache in my chest, and I nodded again, “Ji.” Yet my steps stayed rooted. I watched him step behind the partition and slowly lowered my gaze to the floor.

Thousands of emotions ran through my mind, and I didn’t know exactly what I felt. I wanted to be closer to him, but I couldn’t put it into words.

“You’re still here,” his voice pulled me from my thoughts.

I looked up to see him walking out in a fresh brown kurta, running his fingers through his hair. He came closer, and I instinctively tilted my head back slightly. I could feel my heart thumping hard against my ribs.

“I think... I mean, Hukum, I think I’m... re... ready to...” A flood of thoughts rushed through my head, and I quickly lowered my gaze. “Sleep,” I managed to say.

I turned around to leave, but he caught my wrist and pulled me back to him.

My chest collided with his, and my eyes widened at the sudden closeness.

His arm wrapped around my waist, and before I could even process it, his lips crashed onto mine with raw urgency.

I stumbled back a few steps until my back hit the wall. My breath hitched as his mouth claimed mine deeply, drawing my lips into an unrelenting, fervent kiss that sent a jolt through me.

I gasped as the tension between us grew. My knees weakened when he pressed his body closer.

“Hukum,” I breathed when he shifted angles, giving me a sliver of air before diving back into the kiss.

One of his hands slid up to the nape of my neck while the other kept me firmly against him.

My lips parted when he moved to my jawline, then lower, sucking the skin at the base of my neck.

"Tell me, Aishwarya," he whispered, and I bit my lower lip, trying to suppress the tremble in my voice.

"Hukum?"

He lifted me effortlessly with one arm around my waist, as if I weighed nothing at all. My fingers clung to his arm on instinct as I shivered violently in his hold.

He carried me to the bed and gently set me down.

I looked into his eyes, breathing erratically.

"Allow me," he whispered in a low, husky voice, "to show you what you've been afraid to ask for."

He stepped closer, and I instinctively stepped back until the bed brushed against my legs. Another step from him, and I blinked, overwhelmed by the intensity in his gaze.

"Ask me to touch you, Aishwarya," he implored quietly, grazing the side of my waist with his fingers as he untucked my dupatta. My gaze flickered between his lips and his eyes.

Swallowing my nerves, I lowered my gaze and whispered, "Touch me, Hukum." My voice trembled, and the dupatta began slipping from my shoulder.

He lifted his other hand, taking the end of the fabric between his fingers. "Ask me to kiss you, too, Aishwarya," he added gently.

I nodded slightly, whispering, "Kiss me, Hukum."

He wrapped the fabric around his fingers and then, to my surprise, blindfolded himself with it.

My breath hitched again. He erased the distance between us, and his fingers lifted my chin. His lips brushed mine slowly.

"Everywhere, Aishwarya," he said.

I nodded faintly. "Everywhere."

He kissed me once more before trailing his lips down to my neck. My head tilted instinctively to the side, yielding to

the warmth of his mouth as he planted slow kisses along the curve of my neck, verging toward the bare skin of my shoulder.

His arm curled around the small of my waist, and the other hand rose to cradle the nape of my neck.

With a gentle pull, he moved my hair to one side, and I felt his fingers glide up my back, searching for the strings of my blouse.

There was only one knot.

I felt him hook the end of the string around his finger, slowly curling it as if savouring the moment. I bit my lower lip, feeling as though I might melt into the air.

The moment he tugged at the end of the string, my hand instinctively rested on his chest. My lashes fluttered closed as a rush of sensation flooded my body, leaving my thoughts hazy and scattered.

The blouse loosened, and I instinctively rolled my shoulders, moving in rhythm with his touch as he gently drew the fabric down.

His lips brushed the exposed edge of my shoulder, while the tip of his finger traced a delicate line along the hem of my blouse across my chest.

My nipples ached from the intensity, and I bit down on my lower lip, barely able to breathe, as his fingers slipped the blouse past my shoulders, lowering it to my elbows. My breasts were bare, open to him, not to his eyes, but to his touch.

With the sudden exposure, my breath caught in my throat, and I instinctively buried my face in his chest. Even though he couldn't see me, I felt vulnerably exposed.

"Are you okay?" he whispered, grazing his lips on the skin just beneath my ear.

"Ji," I breathed.

He sucked my earlobe, saying, "Tell me if anything feels uncomfortable. With my eyes closed, I can't read your expressions, baby."

His words soothed something frail inside me. "Ji," I replied again.

He shifted beside me, pressing a knee onto the bed. I leaned back slightly, placing a hand over my chest to hold the fabric close.

And he guided me to lie down.

As my back sank into the softness of the mattress, his lips brushed lightly against my cheek. He seemed uncertain, struggling to find the shape of my mouth, until I tilted my face instinctively, offering him the closeness he sought.

Our breaths mingled, and the moment his lips touched mine, a heat bloomed inside me.

His kiss was slow, painfully tender, and with each movement of his mouth, it dissolved my thoughts. His hand glided from my back to the curve of my waist.

My heart pounded wildly. I gasped as his lips drifted down to my chin, and his hand moved up toward my bare midriff.

My body arched subtly beneath him, responding before I could stop it.

My fingers curled into the bedsheet, grounding myself against the rush of sensation.

"Hukum," I breathed, and immediately bit down on my lip, closing my eyes.

His fingers curled around the fabric of my blouse, dragging it lower, until I was bare. My breasts were exposed beneath his concealed gaze.

As his mouth slid down to the curve of my neck, my shoulder reflexively nudged into the mattress.

"You smell like my end, Aishwarya," he spoke in a low mumble against my skin, while his other hand crept up toward my neck. I shuddered the moment his thumb pressed lightly against my throat, making my head tilt back in surrender.

That simple motion sent a wave of heat surging through me, pooling deep in my core. It hurt slightly, enough to

quicken my breath, and in response, he soothed my skin with a gentle caress.

His rough fingertips slowly slid over my midriff, and he dipped his face lower toward my chest.

I stretched my feet and as I slowly drew my knees up, the delicate jingle of my anklets echoed in the silence, making my head spin faintly.

My brows creased together when he lowered his lips and kissed the centre of my chest. My breath hitched, and my fingers buckled tightly into the bedsheet beneath me. He lifted his head just slightly, trying to look at me.

“Calm down,” he murmured calmly, but it only made the fire inside me burn hotter, because his calm was unbearable.

I felt his palm slide upward from my waist toward my bosom.

“Hukum,” I whispered, as his long fingers palmed my breasts.

He hummed softly in response, biting down slightly on his lower lip as he glanced blindfoldedly at me with an indecipherable intensity. I could barely keep my eyes open, but I forced myself to watch him.

When his thumb gently traced over my bosom, a tremor ran through my body, and a soft sound escaped my lips. My head rolled to the side instinctively, leaving my throat dry.

I drew in a deep breath as his face neared my darkened nipple. A shiver rippled through me when his fingers brushed over my right breast, and a jolt of sensation shot through me the moment his thumb found my sensitive nub.

A soft moan slipped from my lips, and I instantly bit down on my lower lip. My mind buzzed with restless confusion, unable to keep up with the whirlwind of sensations.

“Breathe, Aishwarya,” he whispered against my skin.

“I can’t,” I whined, immersed in the feel of his touch.

His mouth moved closer to my nipple, and I trembled as his warm breath hit my skin. “Do you want me to kiss it?” he

asked, peering up at me.

I couldn't speak. A thousand feelings surged inside me, and yet my body answered before my voice could. I nodded faintly, and my entire chest rose sharply with anticipation.

"Y-yes," I breathed, recoiling my head into the bed.

A rapturous cry slipped past my lips, and my body quivered like a leaf when he tweaked my nipple gently between his fingers.

"Hukum," I gasped, and my head dug deeper into the mattress.

"Say, Hukum, please suck it," he rasped, and I complied mindlessly, as if he had a spell cast over me.

"Hukum, please suck it."

I felt a knot churning in my lower abdomen, making me crush my thighs together as he parted his lips and took my perked bud in his mouth.

I exhaled heavily, feeling the tingling warmth of his tongue. My insides stirred with a storm of emotions, and I bit my lower lip to stifle a scream.

With quiet intensity, his hand reached up, and he enclosed my breast with his fingers, giving it a gentle squeeze. As he tipped my nipple north and enveloped it with his mouth, I grew breathless, as though I were slowly coming undone beneath him.

My fingers dug into his skin as my hand shot up to clasp his wrist, as if I could barely hold on, as if I might slip if I didn't.

"So soft. So beautiful," he whispered, sucking my nipple a few times before letting it go with a wet smack.

The absence of his touch made my toes curl. My eyes fluttered rapidly as he slowly traced my nipple with his fingers, easing the world-shaking sensations until they gently faded away.

I regained my breath momentarily, but then he descended from my chest to my midriff, leaving trails of soft, wet kisses in the path.

I breathed in deeply and sucked on my lip, savouring the heavenly sensations rippling across my skin. His lips felt like gentle butterfly kisses, and a small smile curved on my lips.

I closed my eyes as his hand traced a path down to my ankles, and his fingers gently brushed over my feet, tickling my toe rings and anklets.

The moment his touch reached the hem of my lehenga, I arched my waist instinctively.

A wild tremor shivered through me as he pressed his lips to my waist, and a quiet whimper slipped from my lips when his teeth grazed me gently, giving a tender bite.

I felt his fingers gathering my lehenga, inching it upward. Intuitively, I covered my mouth with the back of my hand as he lifted slightly and pressed his lips against my knees.

I swear, I died in that moment. Every inch of me trembled under the mere touch of his lips.

What in the world is happening to me?

It wasn't painful or harsh, but so sinfully, intoxicatingly blissful.

As he glided up and bit me softly on my thighs, my brows knitted together, and I gnawed on my finger, desperate to muffle the moan threatening to spill out.

I attempted to press my thighs together, but it went down the drain when he steadily pulled them apart.

"Hukum..." I gasped.

He angled toward my inner thigh and breathed over my skin, "Ask me to suck you, Aishwarya."

I bit down on my lower lip. My brain had abandoned all logic, and I repeated the words without even knowing what they meant.

"Suck me, please, Hukum."

"Until you beg me to stop," he added, prompting me to repeat, kissing my inner thigh.

I knew... I knew he would touch me down there between my legs. That the waves of sensations would roll through my body, and I was also desperate to feel his touch there. But I

couldn't understand why I would beg him to stop. It felt too good to resist.

"Say it, Aishwarya," he pressed me again, waiting for my response.

My lashes fluttered rapidly. "Until I beg you to stop, Hukum," I spoke through a shaky breath, trembling by the end.

"You have to say, 'Ranvijay, stop' if you want me to stop," he drawled.

I immediately furrowed my brows and shook my head. "But, Hukum, I can't say your na—"

I choked on my words as an involuntary moan escaped my lips the moment his lips brushed over there.

My whole body trembled as I clenched the bedsheet tightly in my fists. "Oh my God..." I gasped, and my head rolled back.

He muttered softly, "Calm down, baby... It's my first time too."

I bit down on my lower lip and closed my eyes, trying to steady my breath and calm the wild rhythm of my heart.

He slid my lehenga, pooling it up to my hips, and placed a tender kiss on the part between my legs.

I opened my eyes, raised myself halfway and looked down at him, propped up on my elbows.

The sight of his glistening pink lips hovering over my dark-complexioned skin overwhelmed me with shyness.

"Are you okay, Aishwarya?" he asked.

I gave a slight nod, but since he couldn't see me, I responded with a timid, "Yes."

He leaned closer, parted his lips and drew my skin into his mouth, making me ball the sheets in my palm to keep from shuddering too hard.

I let out a shaky breath, and my head drifted back when he angled his face and began sucking me.

My whole body felt like it was sinking deep into the swirling haze of my own mind. His lips were gentle as they

caressed my skin.

My legs shook as he sucked in a small bit of my sensitive skin with his lips. My lower belly shook in sync with his lips, and I lifted my head again to look at him.

I bit the inside of my cheek to calm myself.

The sight of his blindfolded face between my legs had knocked the breath out of me.

Never in my life had I imagined, let alone dreamed, anything like this.

It felt as though he was drawing every ounce of energy from me, stealing it with each shiver and tremble coursing through my body.

Suddenly, he darted his tongue out, and the moment I felt the warmth of it on my skin, a wild tremor tore through me, and a loud cry escaped my mouth.

I couldn't decipher what I was feeling.

My face burned like the sun, and my mind stalled.

I caught the hint of a smile on his lips before he leaned in again, but the sudden nip of his teeth startled me, earning a shameful cry.

"Ah, Huku...." I covered my mouth with my hand and let my head fall back.

I arched beneath the touch, my fingers shook against my belly, and my whole body shuddered as if it no longer belonged to me.

He carried on seamlessly, sucking me, and I tried not to scream.

It wasn't painful or hurting me, but it was intensely, painfully pleasurable.

I could not contain myself when he delved his tongue deeper into me.

I gripped my hair tightly and arched my hips upward.

"Hukum, s-something's happening," my voice came out gruff and coarse. Words broke and slipped through the rush of overwhelming sensations.

In response, he quickened the pace, sucking harder.

“Hukum, please...”

My body stretched uncontrollably, every muscle from my thighs to my core shook, and my toes dug hard into the mattress. It was as if I were shattering into pieces.

A more resounding cry escaped me, and I lost track of just how much my voice had risen.

But he didn't stop; instead, he deepened my shivers with the touch of his fingers.

I felt utterly shameless, but my tongue couldn't bring itself to say his name. “Hukum, please... st—”

Suddenly, I yelped at the feel of his finger gliding over my skin, stroking up and down, teasingly. It felt like I was about to pee.

“Hukum, please,” I pleaded desperately when his hushed voice grazed my ear.

“I'm pushing my finger in, Aishwarya, it'll hurt for a moment, can I?”

“Ah, yes,” despite being too dazed to comprehend a single word he spoke, I replied. His touch there made me feel like someone I never imagined I could be.

I needed it.

Slowly, he pushed his finger in, like a thick needle pricking its way in. My brows furrowed as a sharp pain shot through me.

A throaty whimper slipped past my lips, and I tilted my head back. My body suddenly went motionless.

Every shiver ceased, and I instinctively arched against the foreign intrusion.

For a brief moment, I felt as though I had been transported to another realm, where only I and the sensations existed.

And soon the realisation hit me that his finger was inside me.

A wave of panic surged through me, and for a moment, it felt like my breath was trapped in my chest.

“Calm down, Aishwarya. It's normal. Just breathe,” he muttered softly against my skin. I lowered my hand to touch my core. It was real. “Relax, it's easing,” he whispered, shifting upward.

With his finger still lingering there, he pressed his lips against mine.

“Are you crying, baby?” he asked in the most delicate tone I had ever heard, and I shook my head.

“No, but... what you just—”

“Shhh,” he cut me off gently. “Is it still hurting?” His voice was soft, but I could feel my heart pounding in my chest. It was uncomfortable, yet oddly calming.

Somehow, it felt like he had stopped the wetness that had threatened to escape.

“No, but it's...uneasy,” I managed to say, and he slowly took his finger out.

Our breathing fanned against each other's lips, and I felt like I was about to die. The emptiness inside me was even more painful, and I had no idea what the hell was happening to me.

He pressed his lips to mine and gently wrapped his arms around me.

“Calm down,” he muttered against my lips, and I wrapped my arms around his torso.

With his lips pressed against my face, I struggled to catch my breath.

I didn't need to pee, and the urge was gone. Everything had gone so quiet, and I felt like my whole body had never been this calm.

He kept caressing my face, and slowly, I regained my breath. My heartbeat steadied gradually.

However, it left me with thousands of questions and a great deal of confusion.

I felt his lips brush gently against my cheek. “Can I take it off now?” he whispered, still blindfolded.

I stared at his lips, glistening slightly in the candlelight. I didn't know whether I was ready to meet his gaze. It felt as if I had sinned, a sin that I couldn't speak of with anyone.

His fingers inside me... felt so strange and seemed so wrong. But, good.

Why did he do that?

The way his hair fell across his forehead, his pink lips and the memory of them on me down there stirred feelings I had never known before.

Did he not feel dirty? How could he be so?

And I didn't stop him.

I couldn't believe I had agreed to everything he had asked. I let him do all those things to me.

What had happened to me in that moment?

It felt like something inside me needed to be released. Something that made me wet... that made me tremble... something aching to break free.

And I couldn't believe that there was a space in me I never knew existed, where his entire finger would reach.

"Please," he murmured again, nearing his fingers to the hem of my lehenga, sliding the fabric down toward my ankle.

I wanted to speak, but no words came. I just watched him... him who had touched a part of me no one ever had, in a way I never imagined.

His blindfold still covered his eyes, but he had already seen more of me.

He had touched the part of me I didn't understand, and somehow, with that touch, something had been released. I felt calm.

And now, everything I had once known felt distant. As if this moment, this memory, had claimed all the space in my mind.

But there was still a throbbing, and every sensation was still alive and livelier than anything else in my entire life.

It was as if the feeling and the memory had seized my whole mind, drowning out everything else I had ever known.

"Okay... You're not saying anything. That's worrying me," he said gently, untying the knot.

I didn't stop him because I didn't care about my disarrayed, half-bare state. That no longer worried me.

He didn't see me, yet he felt the parts of me no one else had ever touched. The deepest, most hidden corners of my being, those that I didn't know of.

I could still feel the roughness of his fingers lingering on my skin.

When the cloth slipped away and his eyes finally met mine, I froze.

Those dark eyes, framed by darker lashes and bold brows, looked straight into me. There was something unspoken in his gaze. His face showed no emotion, just blank, but a faint flush tinted his skin. There was a strange glow about him.

Our faces were inches apart. His chest hovered over mine, his knee rested between my legs, and I still had my arms looped around his torso.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

I could look only into his eyes. My gaze flickered down to his lips that had touched me, kissed me, and tasted the parts of me I never thought of.

He kissed me there. Not just touched me, kissed me.

Oh my God.

I wasn't sure I was alive anymore.

The most handsome, intelligent man I'd ever known had touched me there.

I raised a trembling hand and gently ran my thumb across his lips.

"You shouldn't have done that," I whispered. "It's... It's dirty." My voice wavered from the sheer emotional weight of what had just happened. It felt like this moment didn't just pass; it had carved itself deeply into me.

But he only smiled.

I cupped his cheek, frowning in confusion and regret. "Stop smiling. If I had known you would do that... I might have chosen hell," I muttered.

"You've just stepped down from heaven, Aishwarya. Why talk about hell?" he replied.

But I couldn't let go of it. He shouldn't have done so.

He had kissed my feet once... and then this.

My gaze was fixed on his lips, as if drawn by the moments of them kissing me, sucking me. I couldn't tear my eyes away from them. It was ridiculous how a pair of lips stole my sanity.

He kissed me there. My mind screamed as my gaze dropped back to his mouth.

Before I could stop myself, I leaned in and kissed him passionately, with everything I had, desperate to erase every trace of me.

My breathing turned frantic, and my lashes squeezed shut. I parted my lips and sucked him the same way he had sucked me.

My hands slid into his hair and fisted tightly, keeping him close.

The vision of him parting his lips, taking that bit of warm flesh between them, then grazing it with his teeth was vivid beneath my closed eyes.

My own lips parted and clung to his harder, desperate to draw out every feeling his touch had awakened in my core and return it to him.

I wanted him to be clean.

My breath was a mess, and my toes curled helplessly into the bedsheet. He pushed his body against mine, and the pressure made my head tip back.

"Never do that again... please," I whispered against his lips, nipping on his lower lip.

He hissed softly when I bit down, and I hadn't realised I'd drawn blood until the metallic taste touched my tongue.

The memory of his teeth down there... sparked in my spine like a shockwave.

Suddenly, his hand gripped my hair, and he gently tugged, pulling my head back.

I gasped as the pull sent goosebumps racing across my skin.

His lips hovered above mine, just grazing. "You'll ask for it again," he murmured. His other hand gripped my wrist, and he pressed it to the bed beside me.

My heart thundered against my ribs as I felt his fingers intertwine with mine, pressing them firmly into the mattress.

His other hand cradled my jaw gently, lifting my face to his.

When his lips claimed mine again, the pull was so consuming it sucked the breath out of my lungs, and I arched under him, struggling to breathe.

"You're going to cry so badly, baby," he whispered against my lips.

His words made my core throb, clenching tight. My throat ran dry as his teeth grazed my lower lip, pulling it between his until it slipped away with a soft pop.

"Are you going to hurt me?" I asked, trying to breathe.

He shook his head slowly. "Not intentionally," he mumbled and drew my lips into his again intensely. I could feel them swelling with the heat of his mouth.

The honesty of his words churned my insides.

"You shouldn't have sucked me there," I whispered, in between the kiss. "It's dirty."

His forehead touched mine, and as our noses brushed, his breath fanned across my lips. "I could do it every day, Aishwarya, and you wouldn't stop me."

I shivered uncontrollably under his gaze. My fingers laced tighter through his.

"It's... not right. It felt like a secret, a sin, something wrong."

He kissed me softly. "Didn't one of our wedding vows say we're two halves of one another?" he asked. "So if I've sinned, you are a sinner too,"

"Hukum," I whispered, trembling at the sound of his voice in such nearness.

"Tell me it felt good, Aishwarya," he breathed. "Tell me my lips felt good on that tiny skin of yours,"

I didn't answer, but my body pressed against him without hesitation.

"Understand what your body wants from me," he intoned and kissed my lips with the same unhurried intensity. "Not everything that feels wrong is wrong," he said gently.

I opened my eyes and met his gaze. My lips quivered, but I couldn't find the right words.

"You are becoming a beautiful, powerful, aroused woman," he whispered, brushing his thumb over my lip. "And I'm here to fulfil every single need and desire of yours, understand? Every one of them, even the dirtiest, the most sinful ones. It's your right. So ask... demand from me like you own me, baby."

His words settled heavily in my chest, making my throat tighten.

"Now tell me, you liked it?"

I blinked slowly and nodded. "I did... like it," I whispered.

Shame burned in my cheeks, and I dropped my gaze. But he lifted my chin again, forcing me to look him in the eyes.

"Say it."

My heart pounded so heavily, yet I said, "I liked it."

He smiled faintly in response.

Still unsure, I hesitated before asking quietly, "But you... You pushed your finger in me?"

He bit his lower lip. "Did you like it... inside you," he asked.

I gulped nervously.

I didn't know what I was feeling. It scared me slightly, but didn't hurt. It wasn't a wound; it was a kind of torture. Not

the kind that makes you cry, but the kind that makes you scream.

I lowered my gaze shyly and buried my face in his chest, wrapping my arms around him.

"I don't know what I'm feeling." I felt too shy to admit I liked it.

He shifted gently beneath me and pulled me over him. One of his hands brushed my hair aside, caressing his fingers warmly against the bare skin of my back.

"Are you in pain?" he asked. "Tell me the truth, Aishwarya," his voice was filled with seriousness.

I shook my head slowly. "No, Hukum."

I saw him touch my fist over his chest.

Three rings adorned his fingers, and I stared at them blankly. One of those fingers had been inside me.

I couldn't stop myself from gently pulling my hand from his and unfolding his fingers to look at them.

"The longest one," he said, reading my mind.

Silently, I studied its thickness... its length.

It was almost an inch longer than my longest finger. I held my palm up against his to compare, only to be stunned. "Did it go all the way in? I mean, it's long and thick,"

He chuckled slightly. "Yes," he answered, and I hesitantly tried to ask, "Why did you do that?"

A brief silence settled between us before he finally spoke, "Your body needed arousal," he said, "and a part of you responded; something inside that wanted to be touched, awakened at the stimulation of my finger."

My brows knitted together. "So, that was the peak and release you were talking about?" I asked.

I could hear the slow rhythm of his heartbeat beneath my ear.

"Yes," he said in a soft voice.

I lifted my face and rested my chin on his chest, looking up at him. "But how did you know that?" I asked, and he smiled faintly.

“Because every woman has that,” he replied.

My brows drew tighter. “You did it to many women?”

He chortled suddenly, and I didn’t know why, but the image of him doing that to someone else made my chest tighten. The thought of his lips on Moni’s core made my stomach twist violently. I felt something strange and bitter rise inside me.

Shaking his head, he tucked a loose strand of my hair behind my ear. “No. Only a husband and wife should share something like that,” he said in a calm voice.

“Every husband and wife?” I asked quietly.

He nodded.

And suddenly, my mind spiralled to the thought of my sisters and their husbands... of Jiji and Ranaji... *Oh, my God!*

“But... no one ever told me that,” I muttered, feeling confused and embarrassed. I felt stupid, ashamed and overwhelmed all at once.

He smiled, leaning low a little, and teased, “It’s good for me.”



24 Ranvijay

Her breaths became shallower, and I noticed she had fallen asleep as I gently stroked her back.

My restlessness faded soon after. Watching the very source of my desire sleeping peacefully in my arms was an experience unlike anything I'd ever felt.

When she was awake, I felt tempted to kiss her, thrust into her, and make her scream until she begged me to stop. But now, with her asleep beside me, all I felt was peace. Her calmness made me feel relaxed and happy.

For a moment, I'd feared I might've hurt her. I didn't know what overtook me. The feel of her soft skin against my lips, the way she trembled under my touch, the breathy moans that slipped from her lips, the soft chiming of her bangles and anklets completely unhinged me. And when I sensed she was close to releasing, I couldn't stop myself from pushing my finger in.

She had felt so incredibly tight... and wet.

And when she came, her skin clenched around my finger, making me feel an indescribable pleasure. Like I owned that moment. I had been the first to bring her to release, even before she fully understood what it meant.

My control was hanging by a thread last night. I was this close to losing my impulse and completely thrusting into her.

Sometimes, I wondered if she knew what we did. But other times, I felt so pleased, so thrilled that every part of her was mine to explore. I would be her first experience... even in thought. It enticed me endlessly, knowing she is mine to corrupt.

I closed my eyes and let myself drift to sleep, too.



I woke to the sound of birds chirping and the early rustle of the world outside. My hand instinctively searched for her, expecting her sleeping form next to me.

But she wasn't there.

I opened my eyes and scanned the room, but she was nowhere in sight.

That was when I heard the faint clinking of anklets from the bathing chamber, and exhaled in relief, pressing my back against the bed again.

The sunlight poured through the windows. It was too bright. I picked up her dupatta lying beside me and covered my face.

Not long after, her sweet voice stirred me awake.

"Hukum, it's late."

I inhaled deeply and moved the dupatta off my face.

Feeling the bed beside me dip, I opened my eyes and found her sitting beside me on the edge of the bed. With her hair wet and loose, her face gleamed with a different kind of glow. She looked breathtaking.

"Are you okay?" I asked in a quiet voice.

She nodded. "Ji,"

I slowly sat up, watching her reaction closely.

"Are you... hurt or sore?" I asked hesitantly, searching her face for the truth.

She gulped and shook her head.

I nodded slightly, still unsure. Honestly, I was worried. Things had progressed so quickly between us. I hadn't planned it that way. I'd wanted to take it slow. But her trembling, her soft moans, her lips turned me on so badly, I couldn't stop myself from fingering her.

And then... she kissed me. Bit my lip. She was also burning with desire as much as I was, and I had never seen her like that before. I didn't expect it. But God, it felt good.

"Umm... Baapusa has asked for you," she said, breaking my thoughts.

I nodded. "Okay."

Somehow, everything that had happened the previous night felt like a dream. She smiled softly and rose from the bed.

I couldn't resist reaching out and taking her hand.

"Aishwarya,"

She stopped and turned back toward me, blinking nervously.

I knew it was all new to her. The night before, she had been wrapped in a haze of desire and temptation. But sitting before me in the daylight with the fog lifted, she must've felt awkward.

"Ji?" she whispered.

I leaned in and kissed her forehead.

"You are beautiful," I said quietly, "and I felt that."

She blinked and offered a small, shy smile. "Thank you." She slipped out of my touch and stood up again. "I have to go see my sisters. Please have breakfast before you leave."

I nodded. "Have you eaten yet?"

She shook her head. "I will now, with my sisters."

"Alright."

I stepped down from the bed and noticed how her eyes flickered toward my fingers more than once. I could sense she was still trying to process what had happened between us.

I walked closer to her and murmured, "You know... you can ask me to do it again. Anytime."

Her eyes widened slightly, and I noticed how her breathing faltered. My presence had an immense effect on her.

She blinked and looked up at me, then immediately dropped her gaze in timidity. She didn't reply. Instead, she stepped away. "Umm... Hukum, you... you should get ready," she whispered, clearly flustered.

I smiled, watching her, then nodded and turned away.



I bathed quickly and dressed in a fresh maroon kurta. After a quick breakfast, I left the chamber, heading toward her father's.

Even now, a part of me burned with envy. There was no justification for what that man tried to do to Aishwarya. Nothing would ever make that right.

Once the guards outside announced my arrival, I stepped into his chamber.

"Pranaam, Rajaji," I greeted, walking closer.

He stood up from the couch with a polite smile and joined his hands in greeting. "Welcome, Prince Ranvijay. Please, have a seat," he said, and I looked at the attendant who was preparing his hookah. "It's okay; leave us alone and bring something for him to eat," he ordered.

I adjusted my clothes to sit more comfortably on the couch.

"No, thank you, I already had breakfast," I said, and once the attendant left, I turned to her father. "Ji, Rajaji, Aishwarya told me that you wanted to meet," I spoke in my usual voice, but the bitterness curled at its edges.

Honestly, I didn't want to hear anything from him. I had hated him from the beginning, but ever since I had discovered how he treated Aishwarya, I hated him more.

Suddenly, he joined his palms and lowered his head before me. "I'm sorry for everything that I did, Prince Ranvijay," he said in a slow voice, and I inhaled a deep breath. "I am ashamed of even asking for it."

I blinked restlessly and immediately held his hand.

I didn't know why, but suddenly, his behaviour made me feel tense. "You do not have to do it, Rajaji," I said.

"No, please, Prince Ranvijay," he trembled out the words. "I didn't know what came over me." He took a shaky breath before continuing, "The pressure of having many daughters and no son had clouded my mind. I couldn't think of anything else."

He blinked anxiously, as if it were hard for him even to let out the words. Yet he went on. "Aishwarya is my youngest daughter. Even though she's very introverted and less outgoing, she's talkative," he chuckled, looking into the distance, like recalling some memories. "She's always been so scared of everyone... and it's always brought her stress, always caused her problems. And so the mere thought of marrying her off to someone who might treat her no differently made me anxious,"

"She's still like a child," he added, barely above a whisper. "She hasn't seen much of the world or met many people. And when I met you..." He looked up at me. "I couldn't think of anyone else for her. I know I was being selfish then," he admitted, sounding deeply guilty.

"I was only thinking of myself. But please... whatever happened between us, I beg you, don't punish Aishwarya for it. Please, Prince Ranvijay," he pleaded. I could see how his hands trembled. He was genuinely worried about her.

I shook my head. "You do not have to worry about it, Rajaji," I tried to explain, keeping my tone neutral.

Tears glistened in his old eyes as he shook his head. "While her sisters got to feel the warmth of their mother, she has never seen their mother. Even I couldn't give her the love she deserved amid responsibilities, family politics, and a blind yearning for a son,"

He lowered his head in guilt and continued, "Until she left me, I never realised her importance in my life. Day and night, she took care of meals. She was the one who took care of everything. But I never understood her need for affection. Maybe I'd grown so weary of raising daughters I forgot to see how special she was." He took a slight pause, closing his eyes for a moment. "Being a father, I failed her. But please do not punish her for my greed,"

Inhaling deeply, he looked up at me. "When I met you, I found you perfect for her. But I was paranoid. You are such a handsome man, and indeed, a lot of kings had their eyes on

you for their daughters' wedding, and my Aishwarya wasn't too beautiful or attractive. I was afraid you would reject her. So I thought of something that would make you marry her without seeing her," he said, and I remembered when he came to Suryagarh with the proposal.

I looked at his shaking hands. "I knew your Empire was struggling financially, and Songarh holds deep treasure beneath its soil. I thought I could bribe you into marrying my daughter. But my intention wasn't wrong, Prince Ranvijay. I wanted only what was best for her. I wanted to give her a husband who could offer her what we never could."

I inhaled deeply and shook my head. "Please don't speak so. I understand," I said.

"Please, Prince Ranvijay, do not harm my child. I know I have already lost your respect, but she doesn't know anything. It's not her fault."

"I know," I managed to say, although I didn't know how to react. He was much older than I, and watching him cry in front of me made me feel... uneasy. Guilty, even. "I know, Rajaji," I added, looking at him.

"Please never punish her for something she didn't do. I'm truly apologetic," he said, joining his palms again.

I immediately held his hands, dropping them down.

"Don't worry about that, Rajaji. I understand your conflict. I will not justify them, but I'm no one to despise you or punish you for them either. What you did was wrong, but your intentions were not. Also, you can talk to Aishwarya. I'm sure she has no problems with me. I'm always trying my best to give her the happiness she deserves." I replied politely.

He lifted his gaze to look at me.

"I'm really sorry, Prince Ranvijay," he said again, and I shook my head.

"You are way older than me; it doesn't suit you seeking my forgiveness. And, I'm your son now," I said, and he smiled weakly.

Wiping his tears, he looked at me. "I just want her to be happy," he said, and I nodded.

"I understand that."

Perhaps to ease the tension, he switched the topic. "I hope you are feeling at ease here?"

I nodded. "Ji, it's comfortable. Don't worry about that," I said, and inhaled deeply before saying, "But we will have to depart tomorrow morning. The construction on the outskirts of the palace is going on, so I have a few things to manage."

He nodded with a smile. "Of course, I understand. Work is important," he said, and I looked at him.

"Also, we will return your money soon," I said in an assuring tone. "It's alright. I don't need that," he said, and I shook my head.

"Still, it's yours."



25 Aishwarya

It was past evening, and I was still sitting with my sister, all thanks to Hukum. I had visited each of them as they returned to the hall the previous day.

Or maybe I was just buying time to stay away from him.

Whatever happened between us had thrown me into a river of dilemmas. The more I remembered it, the more timid and ashamed I felt.

I couldn't get over the fact that he had sucked me down there. I mean... do all husbands do that?

I wanted to talk about it with someone. But I was too afraid to ask my sisters. I knew they wouldn't take it well, and they'd say something harsh about him, which I didn't want.

Hukum said it was normal, but I wasn't feeling normal. "You should go to your chamber now, Aishwarya,"

Suddenly, my sister's voice pulled me out of my thoughts, and I lifted my gaze to look at her.

"Ji, Jiji," I managed to say.

She smiled softly and added, "Thank you so much for taking care of me. Even though your husband is here, you still spent the whole day by my side. I cannot thank you enough."

I shook my head, rising from the edge of her bed. "You don't have to thank me, Jiji. What else is family for?" I replied quietly, though my mind was still elsewhere.

It wasn't really my plan to take care of her, but I had no better excuse to avoid him. I'd lost all strength to meet his eyes, even for a heartbeat. My vocabulary seemed to have drowned somewhere in the depths of my throat, and I felt utterly drained of energy.

Even earlier in the morning, just being near him had made me feel so timid.

“You should go see your husband now,” she said again, and I nodded slowly before turning toward the door with almost immobile steps.

I had already met my sisters, my father, and everyone I used to miss in Suryagarh.

As the night fell, I had no choice but to return to my chamber.

What he did to me by sucking me was one thing, but what I did afterwards... that's what truly shamed me.

I grabbed his hair and bit his lips.

I couldn't believe it. What the hell had gotten into me?

I couldn't even recognise myself.

I'd never thought of it, never imagined it, never dreamt about it. But in that moment... it felt so right.

But it left me ashamed and exposed.

I approached the chamber slowly, stepping inside hesitantly.

Alright, I'd go in quietly and lie straight in bed.

I didn't dare meet his eyes, speak, or even look at him. What must he be thinking about me?

I'd told him I felt sick when he came close to me, and yet I'd asked him to do it.

Ugh... I asked him. I reminded myself again.

I asked him to kiss my nipple and suck me. I had agreed to everything he asked.

Why?

Why did he have that effect on me? Why did I feel thirsty and wet whenever he came near? Why did my brain stop working and my body behave so strangely in his presence?

And if every woman felt this around her husband, why didn't anyone tell me before marriage?

I inhaled deeply and glanced around the chamber. And finding him nowhere, I let out a quiet sigh of relief and walked toward the bed.

Maybe he was occupied with meetings or work. He never stayed away from duties. Thankfully.

I smiled faintly and stepped closer to the bed.

“Missing me?”

I jumped, startled, almost falling as a wave of panic surged through me at the sound of his voice.

“Hukum—”

He immediately caught me and pulled me closer.

My eyes widened in shock.

“I scared you?” he asked in a teasing tone, and I lowered my gaze. My heart raced just from being near him.

I stepped back slightly and adjusted the dupatta on my head. “Hukum,” I breathed.

He smiled, watching me. “All well?” he asked casually, and I felt a strange twist in my stomach just looking at his lips, curved perfectly into a smile.

“Ji, ji, Hukum,” I stammered.

He walked past me and settled on the couch.

“Have you had dinner?” he asked, glancing at the food placed on the table before him.

“Umm... no, but I’m not hungry,” I murmured. Truthfully, I was hungry, but eating with him would only leave me feeling emptier.

He raised his left brow and asked in a low voice, “What did you eat?”

My eyes flicked to the faint red mark from my bite, still visible on his lip. It made my heart skip, and I glanced away, shaking my head.

“Fruits,” I managed in a small voice.

He chuckled softly and looked at me with a gaze so sharp, it cut through the air between us.

“Come here.”

Those two words didn’t sound like a request; they felt like a command.

I gulped, clenching fists at my sides, and ambled over to him.

Sitting down beside him on the couch, I pressed my thighs together and tried to calm my racing heart. His gaze was

focused on the plate, but mine kept flicking to him.

When he tore a bite and held his hand out to me, my gaze dropped to his longest finger, and I blinked quietly.

I didn't know why, but it felt different and... awkward.

He smiled faintly and brought his hand closer to my mouth, leaving me no choice but to open it for him.

His fingers brushed mine by mistake, but I tried to overlook it and chewed silently, watching as he took another bite himself.

He didn't speak, and I didn't want him to. I was already drowning in shame over what had happened the previous night, and for some unknown reason, even more wetness pooled in my core than before.

We finished eating, though he fed me most of the bites, one after another, before I could even swallow the last.

He looked engrossed in the food, yet the glistening red curry on his bright pink lips had me captivated.

The same lips that had sucked me last night. Recalling the memory of the way he ran his tongue over them, licking the remnants, I suddenly felt parched.

When he was done, he sucked his fingers clean of the spice and lifted his gaze to meet mine.

"You must be tired, Aishwarya. You should go to bed," he said, and I just kept staring at him.

Part of me wanted to lie down immediately. Another part wanted to stay awake just to relive every moment from last night, because every time the memory resurfaced, it brought back that same thrilling sensation, like the taste of your favourite sweet whenever you remember it.

He glanced at me again, and I quickly looked down.

"Ji, I should sleep," I murmured, shaking my head, blinking hard, trying to clear my thoughts.

What am I even thinking? God.... I'm losing my mind.

I stood up from the couch to head toward the bed, but my foot slammed into the leg of the table, and a loud cry escaped me.

His arm wrapped around me instantly, steadying me as his voice followed. "Careful, Aishwarya."

My eyes clamped shut as sharp pain radiated through my toe. I hopped to my other foot before collapsing back onto the couch.

Tears gathered in my eyes as I saw him kneel before me.

"Show me," he said softly.

Winching, I moved my hand away from my toe and watched as he inspected it.

"Thankfully, it's not bleeding," he mumbled, gently pressing his fingers against the sore spot. "It's okay; the pain will fade slowly. Can you not walk properly?" His voice carried a faint edge, and he lifted his eyes to meet mine, with a slight sternness in them.

I didn't know why, but it sent a chill down my spine. "Are you scolding me?" I asked in a low voice, shaken by his tone.

His expression softened immediately. "No, I'm not scolding you, Aishwarya."

Lowering his gaze again, he gently massaged my toe until the pain eased. He said nothing more.

"It's good," I whispered, drawing my foot from his hands and rising from the couch. My heart was still racing. I looked at him. "Aren't you coming to bed?"

He smiled faintly and stood. As he rose, I had to tilt my face up to meet his height.

"I don't think you'll feel comfortable with me," he said softly.

I blinked, trying to process his words. His lips still glistened from the touch of his tongue, and my gaze darted between his mouth and his eyes.

"I never said that, Hukum," I tried to say.

He smiled and stepped closer. "But your eyes are saying it," he murmured.

I stared at the way his lips moved as he spoke.

"How do you know what I want to say?" I asked.

He smirked, and I noticed the sharp gleam of his canines, reminding me of the way he'd bitten me the previous night.

It twisted something in my stomach. "You wear everything on your face, Aishwarya," he said, taking another step closer, erasing the space between us.

My breath caught as he tipped my face up by the chin and leaned in, pressing a single, gentle kiss to my lips.

"And I think you're craving a kiss," he whispered.

My heart pounded wildly, and my breathing turned uneven as I lowered my gaze to his mouth.

He smiled, and the way he did it, I knew he knew what I wanted even though I didn't know what I wanted.

I was terrified of another moment in bed with him, yet I ached for his touch, his hand on my face, my breasts, my thighs. For some unknown reason, it felt... incredible.

"But this time," he began in a low voice, "you'll have to ask me in proper words, Aishwarya." Then stepped away.

I watched him walk to the bed, remove his overcoat, and place it on the side table before lying back on the bed.

All this time, his gaze never left mine.

He patted the space beside him. "Come to bed."

My feet moved of their own will, carrying me toward him.

The dupatta slipped from my head as I lifted my lehenga slightly and placed one knee on the mattress to climb up. I sat beside him and watched as he reached for me, sliding the dupatta off my shoulder.

I clenched my fists in my lap as he looked at me.

Then, with gentle insistence, he touched my forehead and guided me down, easing me onto my back.

I wasn't wearing any heavy jewellery, but even the lightest ones around my neck felt unbearable.

As my back sank into the soft mattress, he hovered slightly over me. And before I could even process what was happening, I felt his teeth sink into my nipple right over the fabric.

I winced softly, and he just smiled, like that sound pleased him.

I narrowed my brows and mumbled in a low, whiny voice, "You bite me a lot, Hukum."

He let out a chuckle and lay down beside me.

In a slow, teasing voice, he said, "**Aadat dal lo, Aishwarya.**" (Get used to it, Aishwarya.)

I couldn't help but look at him lovingly.

"You're doing something to me, Hukum." The words slipped from my tongue before I could stop them.

He smiled faintly and wrapped his arm around me as I turned to my side. He offered his arm, and I gladly rested my head against it.

Our faces drew closer, though the height difference meant his lips hovered near my forehead while mine tilted slightly upward.

"Like what?" he asked in that honeyed, warm tone, and I exhaled deeply, letting my gaze linger on his lips.

"Like I'm falling."

"In love?" he asked, and I blinked, lowering my gaze, then shook my head.

"I don't know," I whispered, and looking up again, asked quietly, "**Prem kya hai, Hukum?**" (What is love, Hukum?)

His fingers began caressing my back gently. There was a long pause before he answered.

"**Prem to Eshwar hai.**" (Love is God,) he said.

I furrowed my brows. "**To Eshwar kaun hai?**" (Then who is God?) I asked.

"**Eshwar hi prem bhi hai.**" (God is Love,) he replied.

I shook my head slightly. "I don't think so," I said softly.

"Then what do you think love is?" he asked again, and I drew in a breath.

"I think love is what I feel for my family. I care for them, I like them, even when they're rude or distant... I still love them."

He smiled. "Yes. That's love, too."

I looked from his lips to his eyes. "Then how is love... God?"

He pulled me closer.

"Because, like God, love lives inside all of us. In humans, in animals, in plants, even in the tiniest of creatures. Without love, there's no existence, no life, no creation. With the love of sun and rain, a plant grows. With the love of their companions, ants build. With a mother's love, even animals grow up without our help. Love for one another is the only force that holds back destruction, Aishwarya. It's powerful. It connects us to God. Something that keeps the world alive has to be divine. That's why... love is God," he explained calmly; his voice held deep meaning behind his words.

I nodded slowly and breathed in what he said.

"It sounds beautiful... but if we don't take care of the plants or animals or people around us, does that mean we don't love them? Because I love them, but I can't feed them all. I can't care for them all the time. Just like now, I can't take care of my father and sisters because I'm here with you. Does that mean I don't love them?" I asked quietly.

He smiled, watching me closely. "Trust me, Aishwarya... you love everyone except yourself," he said gently.

I swallowed hard.

"Because I'm a constant disappointment to the ones I love," I whispered.

As he shifted even closer, his feet brushed mine, faintly disturbing the bells on my anklets.

"Okay, tell me something," he said. "When we have a daughter and she turns out exactly like you. Same complexion, same habits, the second you... Would she be a disappointment to you?"

I paused thoughtfully and then shook my head.

"No, Hukum. If I raise her myself, I'll make sure she doesn't grow up the way I did. And as for complexion, it won't be in her hands, or mine, or yours. Whoever wants to love her will love her despite that."

He smiled at me again. "Exactly. You are not a disappointment," he spoke in a gentle tone. "And even if you feel that way, it was your family's failure not to treat you right, not yours."

He paused as if choosing his words carefully. "You know, people like to say everything is in God's hands. But sometimes... It's in our hands too. Every small choice, every moment we turn away, every moment we lean in, shapes our fate,"

His voice dropped slightly. "Your father... he ignored you. He could have loved you, pampered you, spent time with you, but he didn't. Not because it was fate, but because he was tired of having daughters. That carved you into who you are now. When he could have filled you with confidence and affection," he continued quietly, "he turned away instead... and then dared to label you a disappointment,"

He shifted a little closer. "You see, Aishwarya... watering a plant can save it from death. Feeding an animal or a bird could give it another day to live. But we don't. Because we think it's not our job, even though those same animals give us milk, wool, and balance the world. Love fades when it's neglected," he whispered.

"Your father didn't give it to you, and now, seeing you find it elsewhere, leaves him empty." His hand found mine, holding it gently. "When we don't give love, we don't get love. It's that simple. Love can survive in memories, too."

I stared at him, blinking slowly.

"Do you think my father and sisters were wrong to me?" I asked.

He drew a deep breath. "You tell me, if we have a child, and I don't give her time, would that be okay with you?"

I shook my head. "No. I'd hate you for that," I said honestly.

He pulled me tighter into his chest, and his lips pressed gently to my forehead.

“Now you understand,” he whispered. “It’s not your fault that you became this way, Aishwarya. But it’s never too late to become the woman you truly want to be.”

I closed my eyes, sinking into the warmth of his embrace.

“I really love talking to you, Hukum. No one’s ever spoken to me the way you do,” I whispered, and felt his fingers softly caress my cheek.

“You’re like my baby, Aishwarya,” he said warmly, and I let out a soft chuckle.

“I’m almost twenty now, Hukum. I’m not a baby,” I said in a gentle voice.

He exhaled deeply against my head, and I felt his strong arms almost crushing me. I melted into the hold.

I didn’t know why, but the night held a different kind of magic. All day, I’d been trying to stay away from him... but the moment I lay beside him, I didn’t want to leave.

My heartbeat lightened, my breathing eased, and my eyes fluttered with tiredness. Sleep crept in like a lullaby. The warmth in his arms, the comfort of his chest, and the safety of his breath brushing against my hair made me feel cherished. I felt needed, like I mattered.

My fingers curled into the fabric of his kurta as I drifted off.



I woke up with the feeling of weight on my legs, my chest, and the left side of my body.

I groaned softly, trying to draw in a deep breath, and lazily opened my eyes. The light from a narrow gap in the curtains slipped into the room, stinging my half-sleeping vision. The morning had already begun to dominate.

His leg was between mine, and mine was draped over his. His torso rested slightly over me, and his arm pressed comfortably against my chest as always.

His slow, warm breath brushed against my ear. He looked peaceful in sleep.

Gently, I wrapped my hand around the nape of his neck and stroked him softly. Something was happening to me. I think... I was falling in love.

I cared for him deeply, and I was drawn to him in ways I didn't understand.

He inhaled sharply in his sleep as my fingers moved, and I felt him shift against me, pressing his midriff slightly into mine. A shy smile tugged at my lips. He was... hard again.

Curious, nervous, and completely overwhelmed by the moment, I slowly slipped my hand between us. I reached for the knot of his lower garment and carefully undid it. He shifted again slowly, and I smiled faintly.

Slipping my hand inside, my fingers met the heat of his skin. It was hard and pulsing.

He let out a deep, broken groan. "Oh...fuck..." His voice was husky.

As I gently wrapped my hand around it and stroked it slowly, his breath turned ragged, and he started moving his hips subtly, matching the rhythm of my hand.

I paused, glancing at his face. His lips were parted, his eyes were still shut, and his breathing was quick and shaky. His breath against my ear sent shivers crawling down my spine. I bit my lower lip, unable to calm the flutter in my stomach.

I tried to press my thighs together, but his leg was still between mine.

His length throbbed in my hand, and I loosened my grip when, suddenly, I felt his teeth lightly catch my earlobe, making me gasp. He was awake.

Startled, I instinctively tightened my hold on him. The pressure of his teeth and the growing heat between us made my chest rise in a broken rhythm.

I managed to ease my earlobe from his mouth and looked at his face. His brows were furrowed, and his lips trembled

with restrained moans.

He kept grinding against my hand, and then suddenly, it pulsed and released something hot and thick into my palm.

I blinked, frozen. His body jerked lightly once, then calmed. His chest rose and fell heavily, and after a moment, he slowly opened his eyes.

He looked at me in a daze, and I hesitated, unsure of what I had just felt.

"...Did you just pee?" I asked softly. He let out a faint laugh and shook his head. "Then what was that?" I asked again.

He leaned in and kissed my jaw. Holding my hand, he guided it out and wiped it against the fabric of his lower cloth.

"That's semen, baby," he said softly.

I frowned, still confused. "Semen?"

He kissed my jaw again. "Like my seeds."

I froze. A cold wave ran down my spine, and I opened my eyes wide. "Seeds? What the hell?"

He nodded casually. "Yes. Like every fruit has its child within, as seeds, we have it too."

I immediately pushed him away and sat up straight. "What do you mean?! If that was your seed, what the hell have I been swallowing for so long?" I asked, completely bewildered.

He looked at me in utter confusion, panting for breath. "What?" he asked lazily.

"What do you mean by 'what'?" My voice, usually soft, now carried a sharp edge as I responded. He inhaled sharply. "You told me those were your seeds," I said, pointing to my belly.

He followed my gesture, then looked back at me, narrowing his brows. "Which seeds?"

"The jar. The two-kilogram jar of seeds," I said, raising my voice.

“Yes, those are my seeds too. But... the way you are, my wife, Suryagarh is my home.” I narrowed my eyes in confusion and stepped down from the bed.

“What the hell does that mean? I thought... I thought those were your seeds. And you didn’t even tell me!” I said, exasperated.

He closed his eyes for a second. “What didn’t I tell you?”

“That those weren’t the kind of seeds I thought they were!” I snapped.

He exhaled hard and lifted his brows to meet my gaze. “They were my seeds, Aishwarya. I grew them,” he said calmly.

I bit my lower lip. “And what about these liquid ones?” I asked, pointing toward his lower body.

He flushed slightly. “Those are my seeds... in a different sense,” he said in a slow voice.

“What the hell is the difference, Hukum?”

He sucked in his lower lip, then replied, “The difference is, anyone can grow those seeds. They’re planting seeds. Good for health. But this seed... is for having babies.”

I stared at him in disbelief and palmed my face.

“You made me eat plant seeds,” I groaned in grievance, and he chuckled. “And now you’re laughing!” I snapped, glaring at him.

His smile faltered, and he shook his head with a soft voice. “No, I’m not laughing, baby.”

I let out a frustrated sigh, turned toward the table from last night, grabbed an empty, clean bowl from beside the plate, and walked back to him.

I extended the bowl. “I want these seeds, Hukum,” I said firmly.

He bit his lip, looking at me, half amused, half stunned.

“In this bowl?” he asked.

“Yes. In this bowl. And no more making fun of me,” I added, lowering my gaze.

A momentary silence passed between us before he spoke again. "But I just... wasted it, you see," he said softly.

I looked up with narrowed eyes. "I'm sure you can do it again."

"But what will you do with those seeds?"

I gulped and tried to hold his gaze. "Have a baby."

He nodded slowly, biting his lip again. "But don't you think you're a little too young to have a baby?"

I blinked silently for a moment and replied, "Isn't it the only solution?"

He reached for my hand gently and guided me back to sit beside him. Then, resting his head in my lap, he placed my hand over his chest.

"Solution for what, baby?" he asked in a quiet voice.

"For my sickness," I murmured.

He touched my bangles softly, blinking lazily at me. His lips brushed against my forearm as he asked, "You're sick?"

I let out a long, exasperated sigh. "Yes. Since our wedding. I've been sick."

He smiled faintly and lifted his eyes to meet mine. I used my free hand to push the strands of hair from his forehead and traced his beautifully arched brows.

"Explain it again," he said.

"I've told you a hundred times."

"Just once more," he whispered.

So I tried. "I feel sick every time you come near me. I feel strange inside, my body tingles, my legs feel weak, and there's this... wetness between them. My lower belly stretches. It feels... different. Thrilling."

As I spoke, I felt his lips press softly against my arm, and then he bit me.

I cried with a sting of pain and tried to pull my arm away from his grasp. He smiled, watching me squirm, and I furrowed my brows in frustration.

"You are such a biter, Hukum," I said, and he chuckled.

“Your skin is so soft... I can’t help but feel it against my teeth. And when you cry a little after that...” he smiled deeper, “... I feel the same sensations you do.”

“Really?” I narrowed my eyes, extending my forearm toward him. “Then show me.”

He smiled, taking my arm in his hand. One hand gripped just above my elbow, encircling my thin arm effortlessly. The other held my wrist as he tilted his face sideways, placing his lips softly against my skin. His forehead rested on my arm, and then his lips parted.

I watched his teeth gently emerge, pressing into my flesh. His grip on my arm tightened slightly.

A slow burn-like pain spread across my skin, and a helpless cry escaped my lips.

My other hand instinctively slipped into his hair. His sharp canines peeked out as he nibbled and kissed and licked, switching between soft sucks and deeper bites. It wasn’t just pain; it was a heat that made the wetness in my core swell even more.

His bite sharpened, making me whimper in pain. My lips parted with a shaky gasp, and my eyes blinked closed in waves of sensation. The pleasure-pain mixture blurred my mind. The throbbing ache between my legs intensified.

A storm of invisible but undeniable shocks ran through my brain. He finally released my arm, and I saw the glistening wetness on my skin. His finger imprints, faint bite marks, and deep beet-red patches signed my skin.

He sucked his lip and gave a satisfied smile, and my eyes widened in silence.

He had done the same thing between my legs that night.

I gulped and murmured, “Sensations?”

He raised a brow. “Yes.” I nodded slowly, still dazed. “Who told you a baby would fix this?” he asked.

“Moni,” I admitted hesitantly.

“I’m going to get her the moment we reach Suryagarh.”

“No, you can’t... well, she didn’t specifically say that...”

He looked at me seriously. His fingers found my hand and began gently toying with his mother's golden bangles. He always did that when he was playful and at ease.

"What exactly did she say?"

I sighed. "I told her that... things weren't good between us at first. I didn't know whether you liked me. She said it would get better soon, and that it would all be okay after the baby."

He smiled a little and kissed the same spot he'd bitten just moments ago. The sting had faded, along with the marks.

"We're not having a baby until Bhai-sa and Bhabhi-sa have the next crown prince of Suryagarh," he said, and I could sense that it wasn't a playful remark, but a final statement.

I blinked silently before daring to ask, "But why, Hukum? I mean no offence... I just want to understand. I thought a baby will make you happy,"

He met my gaze and swallowed.

"He is older than us. I don't want any conflict between our children."

"A conflict over the throne?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yes."

I smiled faintly. "I don't think our child would even be eligible, let alone cause conflict."

Ranaji and Jiji were extraordinary people. They deserved the throne, and I agreed with Hukum completely.

He smiled at my response, and I ran my fingers through his hair. "So that means I'll just have to bear this... sick... I mean, these sensations till then?" I pouted.

He laughed softly. "Babies won't help with that, Aishwarya."

I frowned. "Then how will it get... normal?"

He looked up from my bangles. "Never," he replied intensely. "You'll have to bear it until you accept that you can't exist without it, and that you crave it uncontrollably."

A shiver rippled down my spine.

“So I’ll always have to bear it?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Not always. But whenever you can’t control it, you can ask me... to please you.”

I blinked. “Please me?”

He nodded slowly. “Yes. The way we did... remember? My lips there?”

My cheeks flamed, and I bit my lower lip hard. “I-I’m fine... bearing the sensations,” I muttered, and he smirked.

“As you wish,” he said, leaning in a little. “But I think you loved having my finger inside you... my lips wrapped around your soft skin... my teeth biting you... my mouth sucking you hard. And I loved your heartbeat going wild, your moaning, you moving your hips against my lips in perfect rhythm. You felt so, so, so good, Aishwarya...”

His voice grew deeper by the end. “It was out of this world. You lost your sanity under my touch. You release—”

“Stop!” I managed to say, pressing my clean palm against his mouth. My heartbeat raced wildly at his words, and my skin felt flushed with heat.

But he caught my hand. “And you released around my finger. You were so wet... and you want to feel it again, and again, and again,” he finished with his gaze fixed on mine.

A wave of shyness swept over me, and I immediately pushed his head off my lap and muttered, “No, I don’t,” before stepping down from the bed.

“You do,” he said with a teasing smile, “and you’re going to ask me before tomorrow, Aishwarya.”

I shook my head firmly, trying hard to hide the timid smile tugging at the corners of my lips. “No, I will not.”

He kept smiling, clearly enjoying the effect he had on me.

I stopped near the bathroom doorway, then turned to look back at him. “Hukum...”

He looked up at me, still lying across the bed with his chest turned and his head resting sideways. “Hmm?”

I gulped. “Just asking... so, whenever we decide to have a baby, I’ll have to take the seeds with water, right?”

He smiled and buried his face in the mattress like a child, muffling his voice as he answered, "No."

"Then?" I asked, puzzled.

There was a moment of silence before he slowly lifted his head and looked at me.

"Directly," he said softly. "You'll have to take it directly."

Heat surged through my cheeks as I processed what he meant. I furrowed my brows timidly, trying to grasp the implications. But my imagination betrayed me. An image flashed across my mind of his... wetness... on my tongue. It made me feel dirty, nervous, and strangely breathless.

I lowered my voice. "So... that means I'll take it in my mouth?"

His face flushed red at my words. He bit his lower lip, locked his eyes on mine, and said hoarsely, "Go inside, Aishwarya. You're driving me insane right now."

I could feel how affected he was by my curiosity, and instead of backing away, I pressed gently, "I will go... but tell me first. Will I have to take it in my mouth or not?"

He gave a half-smile, shaking his head slightly. "No... not for the baby," he said, and then paused briefly before finishing in a softer voice. "But... if you want to please me..."

He suddenly buried his face back into the mattress, groaning in frustration like a man on the edge. "Now get away from here!" he cried against the bed.

I giggled, watching his playful despair, and turned away with a smile as I walked into the bathroom.



After taking a bath, I stepped out of the bathroom and dressed in a bright pink outfit. The idea of taking it into my mouth still clouded my mind.

In one word, I was becoming insane.

It felt like the more time I spent with Hukum, the more I was learning things I'd never imagined. Things that were dirty, thrilling, and yet... exciting. The part that went beyond imagination was, in fact, the reality.

It all seemed fine and sensational in my thoughts, but the idea of actually doing it... terrified me.

Still, my body seemed to work against my brain. The more I resisted, the more it responded. And it was too much for me to handle.

I heard the faint sound of water running in the bathing chamber and realised he was in.

I braided my hair, placed the dupatta over my head, and added vermilion to the parting of my hair.

The final touch made me pause, remembering how he bit me last night, just above where the pile of bangles ended on my forearm.

The mark of his teeth had faded slightly, but it still lingered... and to be honest, it felt good.

I mean, my sister's children had bitten me before, and their sharp grips had made me cry sometimes, but Hukum's bites were different. They gave me butterflies with the pain. It was like pain had turned into pleasure.

Was I going mad? Yes. Absolutely.

"Ready?" I startled at his voice and lifted my gaze to see him walking toward the dressing table, raking his fingers through his wet hair. As always, he looked incredibly handsome after a bath. He wore a crisp white kurta with matching lower and stood just behind me.

He looked at himself in the mirror, and I didn't even block his view, since my height barely reached his shoulder.

"Hukum," I whispered as he leaned forward to grab the wooden comb from the table.

"Hmm?" He hummed while combing his hair back into his usual style.

"What did you mean by directly?" I asked, still stuck on that part of our earlier conversation.

He smiled suddenly, lowering his gaze to mine through the mirror's reflection.

"I'll tell you when you're ready for it," he said, and I thinned my brows.

"That means after Ranaji and Jiji have babies?"

He smiled and gently pulled my dupatta off my head, cupping the nape of my neck from behind.

I softened at his touch and felt him lean in to kiss my cheek softly.

"No, you'll know when you are ready," he said.

"How?" My voice was filled with childish curiosity as I asked right away.

He leaned closer to my ear and whispered, "You'll feel an uncontrollable urge to be near me. You'll wait senselessly for me, you'll crave me like I'm the only one you need in that moment." His lips brushed my ear, and a chill ran down my spine.

"When will that happen?" I asked, blinking softly.

He smiled faintly. "Such a curious baby you are."

I swallowed nervously. "It's just... I feel like I'm the only one who knows nothing about it. My sisters have babies, so they must know. Moni talked to me about babies, so she must know too."

Then suddenly, a thought struck me. "I'll ask Moni," I said.

He looked at me, and his eyes widened in shock. "No."

I turned to him. "Why?"

He cupped my cheek and made me face him. "Because Moni is stupid. And we're going to have babies together. Why ask her or anyone else?"

I frowned but completely agreed with him. "Okay," I said. And just as I was about to turn, another question bubbled in my mind. "By any chance, will it be P—"

"No more questions," he interrupted firmly. I pouted, feeling disappointed. "We have to leave soon," he added, and I nodded in agreement.

"Okay."

He kissed my cheek softly and murmured, "Go say goodbye to whoever you want to."

I nodded again. "Okay."

As I walked toward the door, he called from behind. "Aishwarya."

I turned. "Ji?"

He smiled at me. "Remember to ask me to do it again."

Heat rushed to my cheeks, and I bit my lower lip, trying to hide the smile that followed.

"No," I said shyly.

He smirked. "And it's our secret, okay?"

I smiled back. "Yes, I know." Then I turned and stepped out of the chamber.

I visited each of my sisters one by one to bid them goodbye. Two of them asked me to stay a little longer, but I told them it was urgent.

I didn't know if it truly was. But what I knew was that I was already missing Suryagarh.

There was something different in its air. It was warm and comforting. And whatever it was... it had ruined me for anything else.

After meeting my sisters, I stepped into my father's chamber, where I found him sitting on the couch. He was coughing lightly, and when he heard the sound of my anklets, he looked up at me.

"Are you ill, Baapu-sa?" I asked gently, walking closer to him.

"Aishwarya, have a seat," he said, and I hesitated, unsure of where he meant.

He patted the couch beside him, and I felt a strange sensation in my chest. He had never asked me to sit beside him before.

I blinked silently for a moment before sitting down next to him. "I wanted to talk to you but didn't get the chance," he said.

"Ji, Baapu-sa," I replied with a small smile.

He returned the smile and gently touched my head with his palm. "Are you happy there?" he asked.

I lowered my gaze and nodded slightly. "Ji," I answered softly.

"Does Prince Ranvijay treat you well? I hope he doesn't trouble you," he asked cautiously.

I lifted my gaze to look at him. "He doesn't. He treats me well and takes care of me," I said quietly.

He blinked at my words, then asked, "Everything is good between you two? I mean... does he spend time with you? Talk to you? I've seen him treating you well here, but I'm asking about Suryagarh."

"Ji, everything is good," I replied. *"Well... except for the strange things I'm still trying to understand between us."* I thought to myself.

He smiled faintly and caressed my head.

"Aishwarya, I know you must find it odd... This is the first time I've truly asked if you're alright. If you were alive, you deserved a childhood. I didn't realise back then that I had to be both a father and a mother to you. And I couldn't give you even a father's love, let alone a mother's. But... I do worry about you, my child."

His words stirred something deep within me. My chest tightened, my throat closed, and the memories of my lonely childhood returned like a flood. Eating alone in silence, waking from nightmares with no one there, and never having a hand to hold. Everything weighed heavily on me.

"I'm sorry for not giving you the love, Aishwarya."

Tears slipped from my eyes, and I couldn't hold them back anymore.

"I missed you, Baapu-sa," I said between sobs, and he gently patted my head.

"I didn't even realise when you grew up and got married. I never saw you as a daughter, only as a responsibility to fulfil. I'm sorry for not giving you the childhood you deserved."

His words shattered something inside me, and I broke into harder cries. I wiped my tears just as the announcement of Hukum's arrival echoed through the corridor.

I hiccuped, trying to control myself.

Baapu-sa stood at the sound of approaching footsteps, and I stood up too.

"It's time to leave," he said, and I broke into another wave of sobs.

I felt his gaze on me, and I lowered mine.

He wrapped his arms around me, patting my head again.

"I can't give you your childhood back, but I hope you get all the happiness in this world, my child."

Fresh tears rolled down my cheeks as he stepped back. I was hiccupping, struggling to catch my breath.

"It's time," he repeated softly.

I saw Hukum standing nearby, watching me. I walked to him and slowly wrapped my arms around him.

"Hey... it's okay... calm down," he whispered, gently patting my head and holding me close. I felt his arms envelop me, soothing my hair with the other. "We can stay longer if you want," he mumbled, and I hiccuped again, slowly calming.

He cupped my cheek and made me look at him, wiping my tears.

"Good girls don't make their parents cry. Your father will be worried if you leave him with tears," he said softly.

I looked at him with my wet eyes. "You want to stay?" he whispered.

I shook my head a little, and he caressed my cheek. "Okay. Then wish your father goodbye with a smiling face," he said.

I tried to compose myself, turned to my father, and found him smiling at me. I bent down and touched his feet, and he placed his hand on my head.

"God bless you."

Hukum also bent down to touch his feet, and Baapu-sa pulled him into a fatherly hug.

“Come again whenever time allows,” he said.

“Sure,” Hukum replied warmly.

My father hugged me one last time and placed his hand on my head.

“I’ll wait for you outside,” Hukum said softly and walked ahead.

“Aishwarya,” my father called again, and I turned.

“Ji?”

He looked at me with sad eyes. “I know you’ve found a new home there... but if you ever feel like coming back, even just for a few days, I’ll never ask you why.”

I blinked, trying to hold my emotions in, and nodded silently.

He walked beside me toward the main entrance of the palace, where Hukum waited with the entire convoy ready. My father had packed many gifts for us.

He walked me to the palanquin, and I hugged him again as Hukum approached.

I gulped down my tears and said, “Take care of yourself, Baapu-sa.”

He smiled sadly and blessed me. “You too.”

I lowered myself into the palanquin and heard him muttering to Hukum. **“Aapke prawaas-kaal mein, yadi humaaare aathitya mein koi chuk ho gayi ho, to krupaya humein kshama karein, Jawai-sa,”** (Pardon us if there was any shortcoming in our hospitality during your stay, Jawai-sa.)

My heart turned heavier. It was no easier than the first time I’d left, except now, I truly knew who my husband was... and what he meant to me.

“No, no... I enjoyed being here. And thank you so much for having us. It was truly a pleasure,” Hukum replied graciously.

Through the crack in the curtain, I looked at him only to find him looking right back at me. He winked suddenly, and a soft, timid smile crept onto my lips out of nowhere.

“Happy journey... and please take care of my daughter,” my father said.

Hukum smiled lightly and replied, **“Aap chinta na karein... aapki putri ka dhyaan rakhein na rakhein, parantu apni patni ka dhyaan hum awashya rakhenge.”** (You need not worry. I may not take care of your daughter... but I will undoubtedly look after my wife.)

My father joined his palms respectfully, and Hukum hugged him gently.

“And you must take care of yourself, and visit Aishwarya whenever you wish,” he added. “Ji,” my father replied quietly.

The two of them walked away, and soon I heard the faint sounds of horses neighing and footsteps approaching. The palanquin lifters slowly raised it off the ground, and our journey began again, backwards yet forward.

Back to Suryagarh.

Back to my true home.

Not just because Hukum was there... but because, for the first time in my life, I felt like a part of a family.



26 Ranvijay

As we approached the market, having already covered over half the journey, the thought of visiting it with Aishwarya struck my mind. I turned to glance back at the convoy.

"Let's rest here for a while," I said aloud, and the attendants and soldiers slowed down and stopped.

I dismounted from my horse and noticed some of them looking at me with confused brows.

"You all should get some water and rest. The weather is pleasant, isn't it?" I said, and they responded in unison,

"Ji, Prince."

I smiled and walked toward Aishwarya's palanquin. "Aishwarya," I called softly.

She peeked through the curtain. "Are we home? Isn't it early?" she asked, frowning in mild confusion.

I shook my head. "No. Come out."

She looked at me for a moment before stepping down from the palanquin. Fixing the dupatta neatly over her head, she glanced around with slight tension on her face.

"What happened, Hukum? Why did we stop here?" she asked, scanning the area.

I smiled at her cute, slightly worried face. "Let's go to the market."

Her eyes widened. "The market?" she asked, amazed.

I nodded. "Yes, it's close."

She turned to look at the convoy as it slowly settled and dismounted. "But what about them?" she asked.

"It's pleasant weather. Let them rest for a while," I replied.

She shook her head hesitantly. "What will everyone think if we get late? They must be expecting us," she said in a soft voice.

I held her hand. "Calm your mind down, Aishwarya. Let's just go," I said, pulling her a little closer.

I asked a small group of soldiers to accompany us discreetly for safety. We began walking toward the market, and as I glanced at her, I could already see the mix of shock and excitement playing on her face.

It was a short walk, and as we neared the busiest market of Suryagarh, I felt her grip tighten on my hand. The market was the largest in the region, renowned for its extensive variety and affordable prices. Traders from across Indira came here to set up their stalls. It had been thriving for centuries.

"I've never been to market before," she exclaimed. Her eyes widened in amazement.

"All yours. Get whatever you like," I replied.

"Clothes?" she asked curiously, still absorbing the sights.

Since it was crowded, I let go of her hand and put my arm around her shoulders. "Come with me."

We moved through the crowd until we reached the clothing section. She gasped as her eyes landed on the endless stretch of vibrant stalls. So many colourful, embroidered, glittering, simple, and luxurious items were present.

"Oh my goodness," she breathed, trudging toward the first stall.

"Welcome, welcome! What are you looking for?" the shopkeeper asked, managing multiple customers at once.

Aishwarya stared at a section of dupattas. Her gaze moved from one fabric to the next, taking it all in with childlike wonder.

"I want to see that one," she said, glancing at me.

"Show her that one," I said to the shopkeeper, and she smiled before turning her attention back to the fabrics.

He brought out a beautiful multicoloured dupatta, embroidered with soft **latkans** at the edges. Shades of pink, orange, green, blue, yellow, red, and purple were stitched together in perfect harmony.

"It's beautiful," she whispered, running her fingers along the embroidery and tassels.

I watched her eyes light up with joy and the simple thrill of choosing something for herself. Things she had never truly known.

"How much does this cost?" she asked politely.

"Ten golden coins," he replied calmly.

She turned to me with confusion in her eyes. "Is that costly?"

I smiled at her innocent question and shook my head. "No." Though it was.

Every kingdom depended on its gold coins, minted from mined gold, collected through taxes and tolls, earned through the conquest of empires, and generated from trade and commerce.

However, the kingdom of Suryagarh and its surrounding territories were facing a severe coin crisis. The demand among the people was growing, but the kingdom was releasing fewer coins into circulation. As a result, some of its states were experiencing rising unemployment, inflation, and an overall economic recession.

"Can I buy it?" she asked.

"Of course. You can have anything," I replied.

"I want to take it," she told the shopkeeper.

He extended his hand toward her, and she looked at him in confusion, tightening her hold on the dupatta, uncertain why he was reaching for it.

I chuckled softly and took the dupatta from her hand, passing it to the shopkeeper. "He's asking for it to be packed," I said, pulling out the coins from my pouch and handing them over.

I glanced at her impatience as she kept her eyes fixed on the shopkeeper. Her expression clearly showed she didn't quite trust him yet. She didn't look away until he packed the dupatta neatly in a small jute bag and handed it back.

She took it and smiled at me. "It's beautiful."

I nodded. "Yes, it is."

"Let me hold it," I said, extending my hand, and she gave it to me.

We moved on to another shop, and then another, and another, until she had seen every corner of the market. Before long, half the soldiers were burdened with her purchases. She seemed excited as never before.

Once we were done in the clothing area, we looked around at stalls selling utensils, decorations, and rugs. She stopped before a large cream-coloured carpet with maroon designs. It was soft, and the way she looked at it told me everything.

"Can we buy it too?" she asked.

I chuckled. "Where will you place it?"

She smiled. "In the courtyard. For the nights when you can't sleep on the bed, we'll make this one our bed."

Her words pulled an image to my mind of thrusting into her while we lay naked on that carpet on a moonlit night.

Breathe!

"Okay," I said and instructed another soldier to take it along.

She even picked out fragrances of rose with spice, cinnamon, and sugar, lavender with a hint of mist, and so many that I lost count.

"You like using perfume?" I asked.

She shook her head. "These are for you."

"For me?" I frowned.

She chuckled. "Yes."

"Why? Do I smell?" I asked, pretending to be serious.

She looked at me, amused. "No. It's to honour your oddly satisfying and charismatic presence. The women in the palace are already insane for you, and when you walk wearing these, they'll go crazier."

She laughed, and I couldn't help but chuckle along with her.

"You're buying these to make them jealous."

“Not jealous,” she said, lifting her chin, “but to mark my territory. When they smell your perfume on me, they’ll know who you belong to.”

I was stunned by her confidence. At that moment, I just wanted to devour her right there, in the middle of the crowd.

“And how do you plan on getting the smell off me?” I asked, smirking.

Her eyes twinkled as she remarked. “It’s your ritual. You hug me, kiss me, or sleep with your hands on me every single day. There hasn’t been a single day since our wedding that you haven’t. So... like that.”

“Smart wife,” I murmured, impressed.

She shopped for Bhai-sa, Bhabhi-sa, Agastya, Moni, Badi-maa, her sisters-in-law, and everyone she had even the faintest connection with.

By the end, she was exhausted, and the soldiers were nearly overwhelmed by the weight of all her purchases. Some had to call for more help. But she was happy.

I asked her to buy some stitching supplies too, and she purchased threads, beads, and everything she liked or had once dreamed of owning.

I’d never been too fond of money or treasure. But in that moment, I understood that effort needs resources. Whether mental, emotional, physical, or most of all, time.

After finishing, we returned to where the convoy had been waiting. She got hungry after all the walking, and thankfully, the attendants had already prepared food for everyone. Night had fallen by the time we arrived, and the tents were all set.

We stepped into ours, and she immediately collapsed on the mattress. Because the tents weren’t part of the original plan, they didn’t bring beds or heavy furniture; instead, they only carried the emergency mattresses and coverings they always had.

I chuckled at her and reached to undo my overcoat.

"I'm tired, Hukum," she said, glancing at me with a slight pout, before laughing a little.

"But it was amazing. You know I've never seen a market before. This was the first time I had shopped for myself. Since childhood, I wore clothes my sisters chose, used what they picked, but today... today, I shopped for myself. I'll tell Jiji. She'll be so happy! And did you see that dress? He said it was imported! Women from other continents wear that! It was so beautiful. It looked so shiny and elegant! I bought one for me, one for Jiji, and one for Devarsa's wife. Well, whenever he gets married..."

She kept talking and laughing, and I just listened.

Initially, we spent most of our time with the silent, timid Aishwarya. But that day, I met another side of her, which was playful and lovely and talkative, just like her father had said. She didn't change. She had discovered a new piece of herself.

She spoke throughout dinner, and I watched her eat. She ate everything until her stomach ached, and yet, she still craved sweets.

Her eyes were shining differently. I could tell she had truly lived the day.

After dinner, she removed her jewellery and dupatta and lay down on the mattress. I lay beside her, propping my head on my elbow, simply watching her talk, laugh, and remember, and her fingers gesturing animatedly.

Our knees often touched as she kept shifting and moving in excitement. I heard her voice, but it was my eyes that truly listened.

"...and then she said that—" she laughed again.

"You know, I'm thinking of designing something for you. I even bought a book, a quill, and some ink. Do you think in six months I'll be able to read and write?" She looked at me expectantly.

"Way before that," I replied softly.

She kept talking, but I was feeling drowsy. Wrapping my arms around her, I pulled her closer.

“Are you listening?” she asked.

“Hmm...” I could only hum near her ear and didn’t know when I fell asleep.



I woke up next to her, only to find her sleeping in my arms. We lay facing each other. Her arm was draped around my torso, and her cheek rested against my chest. Her hair looked tousled, and her feet were tangled with mine. I cradled her head, and in that moment, she looked so incredibly alluring in her sleep.

Her collarbones and shoulders glowed softly in the dim light. The pink fabric draped over her brown skin as if it belonged there.

I took a deep breath and couldn’t stop myself from touching the base of her neck.

She inhaled gently at my touch as I brushed my fingers along her cheek.

“Aishwarya,” I whispered.



27 Aishwarya

His tender voice stirred me from sleep, and I inhaled deeply as I slowly awakened. My eyelashes felt heavy as I stretched my arms against him and finally opened my eyes to find him already smiling at me.

A smile curved my lips, too. There was something beautiful about waking up beside him.

I remembered all the shopping from the previous day and couldn't believe I had even dreamt about markets in my sleep.

Snuggling closer, I pressed my face into his chest and fisted my hand in the soft fabric of his kurta. I felt lazy and entirely at peace.

"We have to leave for Suryagarh, Aishwarya," he said, and I nodded against his chest without lifting my face. He chuckled and tucked a loose strand of my hair behind my ear. "Get up," he said softly.

I smiled and shook my head playfully. "No."

He leaned closer to my ear and whispered slowly, "Do you want me to do that again?"

His voice sent a shiver straight down my spine, and memories bubbled up to the surface. Immediately straightening up, I exclaimed, "No!"

He laughed, clearly amused. "Get ready," he said with a smile, and I could feel the heat rush to my cheeks. I blinked slowly, still flustered, and watched as he sat up beside me.

Then he leaned near my neck, and my body tensed slightly under his touch.

"Get ready to leave," he murmured.

I blinked again, realising with horror what I'd just assumed. I thought he was telling me to get ready for... that.

What is wrong with me? Am I truly that insane?

He pressed a soft kiss to my neck and pulled back, meeting my eyes.

"You're going to ask for it, I know," he said, and I stared at him, stunned.

How did he know what was going on in my head? How did he always know what I felt when he came close?

He smiled, reading my silence, and I dropped my gaze with embarrassment. I was such a mess.

As he stood to walk out of the tent, I mumbled under my breath, "I will not ask, Hukum. It's... dirty."

He paused and looked back at me, smirking. "Accept it, you like it dirty, Aishwarya."

His words sent another shiver through me, and I immediately lowered my face into my hands.

He chuckled again and finally strode out of the tent. I got up quickly to get ready too.

The attendants had already begun packing. Soon, we were all set to leave for Suryagarh.

I sat inside the palanquin, and the journey began. By late afternoon, we arrived at the gates of the palace.

Stepping down from the palanquin, I pulled my veil low till my nose and proceeded towards Hukum.

"No need, Aishwarya," he said, lifting my veil back up to my head.

I felt timid, aware of all the eyes watching us. And somehow, standing beside him only made me more conscious. No matter how much I tried to push those thoughts away about my complexion, my worth, my undeserving place, they always seemed to return.

"Come," he said, holding my hand.

As we approached the main entrance, I noticed Jiji and Ranaji were already waiting for us.

My lips curved into a wide smile the moment I saw her smiling back at me.

"Pranaam, Ranaji,"

"Pranaam, Jiji,"

I greeted them both with folded hands.

"Pranaam, Bhai-sa and Bhabhi-sa," Hukum said beside me, and we both bent to touch their feet.

"God bless you," they said together.

As I rose, Jiji immediately pulled me into a tight hug.

"I missed you so much, Aishwarya," she whispered, and I smiled, hugging her back.

"I missed you too, Jiji."

The hug was long and comforting, unlike anything I'd ever experienced with my own sisters. When she finally let go, she cupped my cheeks and asked, "Did you enjoy it?"

I chuckled and nodded. "Very much."

I didn't know why, but my eyes welled up with emotion.

"You both should eat and rest now," she said as we walked into the palace. I glanced ahead and saw Hukum and Ranaji walking ahead, already engaged in conversation.

"I bought so many things, Jiji," I said with excitement. "I want to show you everything."

Her eyes widened with surprise. "Really? From where?"

I bit my lower lip, trying to hold back my excitement. "Hukum took me to Suryagarh's famous market."

She stopped walking and looked at me in disbelief. "He took you shopping?"

I nodded. "Yes! I even brought you something."

We kept talking all the way until we reached my chamber. Jiji told me Devar-sa hadn't returned yet.

"You should rest first," she said.

I nodded. "Ji."

I stepped into my chamber and paused for a moment, taking it all in. The curtains, the bed, the couch, the floors, the familiar carpets... everything was exactly how I'd left it.

It was all so beautiful, and the fragrance of the room immediately felt like home. The chaos within me calmed the moment I stepped inside. I walked toward the bed and sat down, taking a deep breath.

Hukum wasn't here. Maybe he was still with Ranaji, probably discussing the mountain matter. I exhaled slowly and stood up, walking into the bathroom to freshen up.

I changed into my usual comfortable white lehenga for the night. After dressing, I stepped out to find the attendants placing a plate of food on the table.

The moment I saw the food, my stomach growled. I couldn't stop myself. Maybe Hukum was having lunch with Ranaji, so I sat down and ate quietly.

Not long after I finished, Jiji came to my chamber. Surrounded by our attendants and all the women, we laughed and talked for hours, sitting on the bed.

I showed her everything I had bought at the market. By the time we were done going through all of it, darkness had fallen.

She looked so happy seeing all the things, and even took a few that I insisted on giving her.

I handed her the dress I had picked out especially for her. She held it with joy in her eyes.

"What about Devar-sa, Aishwarya?" she asked suddenly, and my eyes met hers. A shy smile tugged at my lips the moment she referred to him.

I looked down briefly and replied softly, "Anything he likes, he can use."

She chuckled, then leaned in, teasing gently. "Are you giving him what he wants?"

I thinned my brows slightly. There was a brief pause. I wasn't sure how to answer. Eventually, I said in a hesitant voice, "I think I do."

Then, suddenly, she took my hand and tilted her head slightly, looking at my arm.

"What is this? Did he do it?" she asked with a knowing smile, looking at the faint, faded mark above where my bangles usually ended.

I looked down, my stomach flipping just from the mention of it. "N-no... it was one of my sister's babies," I lied, my

voice uneven.

I didn't know whether I should talk about it. But deep inside, I wanted to. I wanted to ask her... something.

"Jiji," I whispered.

"Hmm?" she replied, giving me her full attention.

I swallowed hard and asked slowly, "Have you ever done something... that felt sinful? I mean... something you knew wasn't right, but still... you did it?"

She sat up straighter and looked at me with a calm demeanour.

"Aishwarya," she said with a thoughtful smile, "everything is sinful in one way or another. A decision that you make might be good for one person and wrong for another. So you can't exist without sins. Whether minor or major, we all carry them."

I blinked slowly, listening carefully.

"But what if it's something that feels good... yet still wrong? Like, you know it's not right, and still, you..." I trailed off.

She tilted her head slightly. "Unless it harms someone, it's not the sin you should fear. But if you tell me exactly what you're referring to, maybe I can help."

I blinked nervously. My throat was dry. I didn't know how to put it into words. I looked at her with wide, shy eyes, and my cheeks felt hot.

She observed me for a moment, then asked gently, "Is it about Devar-sa?" I nodded slowly.

She smiled and leaned closer again. "Did he do something that didn't seem right?" Again, I nodded. "But it gave you butterflies?" I nodded, turning my lashes south. "And it felt... good?"

A deep breath escaped my chest as I nodded once more. My face was flushed.

She smiled even wider. "Then what's the problem?" she expressed with warmth and amusement.

My heart thudded fast. I couldn't look at her for long.

“Jiji... it felt good and wrong at the same time. I mean, it felt good to me, but seeing him do that didn’t seem... right,” I managed to explain.

Her smile turned mischievous. “Did he go down on you?”

A wave of shock and mortification ran through me. I immediately covered my face with my hands.

“Jiji!” I cried, hiding.

She laughed, pulling my hands away. “You lucky girl!” she teased.

I lowered my eyes in embarrassment. I felt shame, confusion, and a strange spark of joy I didn’t know how to name.

“It’s not a sin, Aishwarya,” she remarked softly. “If he doesn’t please you, then who will?”

I looked at her, startled. “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” she said with a fond smile, “he’s your husband, and you’re his wife. Just as he has the right to take pleasure from you, you have the right to receive it from him. He’s the only man you can be sinful and dirty with.”

Her words settled in my heart with a strange fervour.

Still, another question had taken hold of my mind. I hesitated, but asked, “Jiji... does Ranaji also... do that?”

She looked at me and cupped my cheek tenderly.

“Yes, he does. And it feels beautiful,” she said. “In a world where most men are obsessed with taking everything from women,” she continued, “our men are trying to give us what we deserve, equal to what we give them.”

She said, and I gulped nervously. “Not every man does that?” I asked softly.

She shook her head with a faint smile. “Not everyone is lucky like you and me, Aishwarya.” Then, out of nowhere, her smile widened mischievously. “And you’re far too young to know what else Ranaji did to me.”

I frowned slightly, feeling my curiosity stir. “What else did he do to you? I mean... what’s the... extreme?” I couldn’t quite find the right word, but she seemed to understand.

Her expression turned coy, and she lowered her voice. "You know, I was leaving for my maternal home for Holi. He had a lot of work back here, so he couldn't come with me. But... he did something that kept me thinking of him the entire way, and even while I was there, until he came to get me."

I swallowed hard. A strange flutter passed through my stomach. "What did he do?" I asked in a whisper.

Getting closer, she said slowly, "He got this golden oval thing... and he placed it between my legs. You know... inside."

"Inside?" I gasped. A sudden wave of goosebumps rose across my skin just from imagining it.

"But... why?" I asked.

"To keep me hungry for him," she said with a smile. "Like how you crave food when you haven't eaten all day."

I blinked nervously. "Didn't it hurt?"

She tilted her head slightly and smiled. "A little. But it was the kind of pain that's worth the pleasure that follows."

My heart was thudding oddly in my chest. Why would he do that? What pleasure would she get out of it?

I didn't understand it at all.

Still confused, I asked, "Did you cry from the pain?"

She shook her head. "No. It wasn't like a wound or a sword cut. It was a... sweet kind of pain."

I just stared at her, not knowing what to say.

"Rani-sa," an attendant's voice pulled us out of the conversation, and we both turned.

"Ji?" Jiji responded.

"Ranaji is asking for you," she said.

"Tell him I'll be there in a bit," Jiji replied. The attendant nodded and left.

Then she turned back to me with a warm smile.

"Don't resist, Aishwarya," she said gently. "Trust your life... and most importantly, trust your husband. He will

never want anything bad for you. But, only if it feels right to you,”

She stood up from the bed, and I followed, still dazed by everything I had heard.

She cupped my cheek with one hand and smiled softly. Then her gaze dropped to my arm, and her smile turned playful.

“And by the way... It’s called a love bite,” she said, pointing at my arm. I looked down and smiled shyly. “Give him one too,” she winked and turned away, leaving me alone in the chamber.

I sat back on the bed. My heart was pounding wildly, and my mind was still loud and chaotic, when I saw Hukum walk in.

He was holding a stack of papers in his hand and frowned as his gaze found mine.

“All well?” he asked, and I lowered my eyes for a moment.

“Ji,” I replied softly, trying to shake off everything Jiji had just told me. I couldn’t believe it.

How and why would someone do that? It was scary even to imagine.

And yet, I didn’t know why, but it reminded me of the feeling of his finger inside me. It was long, rough, and painful... but there was a strange pleasure in it too. Or should I say, it was a wave of pleasure with a tint of pain?

I lifted my gaze to see him seated on the couch, pulling the table closer and arranging the papers on it. He looked even more attractive when he worked. Sometimes I felt like becoming a book he could read attentively and passionately.

The thought made me smile.

I walked towards him. “Have you had dinner?” I asked in a soft voice.

He nodded without looking at me, counting something on his fingers. I waited until he finished writing and looked at me.

“Yes, with Bhai-sa. Have you?” he asked, returning to his task.

“Yes, with Jiji,” I answered, watching him quietly.

He was focused entirely on his work, and so I didn’t want to disturb him, but I wanted to be around him, to spend time with him. And when he took out his ink and pen, I knew it was wise to take out mine too.

I walked away, fetched the new ink bottle and pen I had bought, and sat beside him on the couch.

He glanced at me and smiled. “Missing me?” he asked softly, and I nodded. He gave me a quick kiss on the cheek and said, “I’ve got urgent work to finish.”

I nodded and pulled out a loose piece of paper. “What should I write now?” I asked.

As he leaned closer, showing me a few new strokes, I listened carefully. I didn’t know why, but everything seemed easier once I learned how to hold the pen properly.

It didn’t feel difficult anymore to draw the strokes he asked for.

Time slipped by. I looked at the small pile of papers I had filled and smiled to myself; it felt like an achievement.

Smiling, I turned to him.

He looked tired. I gently palmed his cheek, feeling his exhaustion.

“You should sleep now, Aishwarya,” he said, noticing my yawn.

“Aren’t you coming to bed?” I asked.

“I have to finish this before tomorrow,” he said.

I swallowed. I didn’t want to sleep without him. “Can I help with anything?” I asked.

“Maybe once you’re able to read and write, we’ll work together,” he said.

“Okay then... I should study a bit more,” I smiled, pulling out another paper. “What next?”

He raised his brow, impressed, and I giggled.

He began teaching me numbers, from one to ten. That was tricky. I knew how to count aloud, but not how to write them. I practised until I remembered each symbol, and then he taught me how to continue counting forward.

It was fun.

I kept yawning, and tears formed at the corners of my eyes from sleepiness, but I kept writing. I didn't want to stop.

Finally, he closed his ink and quill, looked at me, and smiled. "Done!"

A wide grin broke across my face.

He stood up. "Come, get up," he said, extending his hand.

Just as he had carefully arranged his books and papers, I stacked mine neatly and placed them on the side.

I took his hand, and he suddenly pulled me into his arms, lifting me off the ground.

I giggled and yawned hard. "Oh, my baby is sleepy," he teased and placed me on the bed, kissing my forehead before lying beside me and wrapping his arms around me.

As soon as my back touched the mattress, I fell asleep.

I didn't remember anything after that until I woke up feeling content and well-rested.

The sunlight was bright through the windows, warming my cheeks. I blinked and reached for him, but he wasn't there.

The morning was already halfway through, and the attendants were at work.

My eyes fell on Moni, folding the comforter.

"Where is Hukum?" I asked.

"He's at the court," she said, and I blinked. Right. He had said it was urgent.

I finished my morning rituals and spoke with the attendants a little. But deep down, I was missing him, especially his smile.

Why does he have so much work?

I waited, hoping he might come for lunch, but an attendant came instead, informing me that a guest had

arrived and that he would eat there.

After lunch, I took out a dupatta to stitch, hoping it would calm my mind. But it didn't. The more I tried to focus, the more I missed him.

The events of that night kept coming back to me. The feeling of his lips on me, his breath on my skin. The way he had touched me...

The heat building inside me was unbearable. I drank too much water. And ended up peeing just as much. Still, it wouldn't stop.

Just one thought of him, and sensations swirled inside me. My thighs pressed together automatically, and my stomach fluttered. It felt as if my body lost control of itself.

It felt as though he had possessed me.

He wasn't there, but his presence was woven into every corner of the room, into my skin, into my breath, even into my heartbeats, and into my thoughts.

The way he had taken over my hunger and thirst, my mind and my soul, how could he not be here when everything in me screamed his name?

Why is the sun taking so long to set today?

I kept looking at the sky, willing it to change, willing for the time to move faster.

I didn't want to speak to anyone. I just wanted to talk to him. Even the previous night, he hadn't been the same. His work was beginning to feel like... my enemy.

Thousands of thoughts, with hundreds of possibilities, ran through my mind until the sun had set and darkness surrounded the courtyard.

And one stubborn thought kept hitting me: I needed to ask him. I had to.

Urgh...

If only he would start... if only I could just let it happen. But asking it was... terrifying.

Still, the more I missed him, the more my body ached. And the more I remembered his touch... the more insanely I

longed for it.

The vision of his lips on my neck, my thighs, my nipples, down there, and all over my body sent shivers down my spine.

And unknowingly, unwantedly, an urge was building within me.

"Prince has arrived in the chamber, Princess," As the attendant's voice reached my ears, I emerged from my wandering thoughts.

At the mere mention of him, a sudden heat rose in my cheeks.

"Okay," I said, swallowing the tightness in my throat. I blinked nervously, wrapped up my things, and handed them to an attendant, hoping she would place them somewhere safe.

I walked into the bedroom and saw him standing near his almirah, flipping through a book. I didn't think he had noticed me yet.

Why, Hukum? Why are you doing this to me?

The moment he lifted his gaze and saw me, I froze.

"Sorry, I couldn't make it for lunch. I hope you're not mad," he said in a casual voice, but his hair was messy and his face was clearly tense.

I walked closer, pouting as I asked softly, "Do I have a right over you... over your time?"

He furrowed his brow slightly and nodded. "Of course. Why would you say that?"

I nodded too, trying to breathe evenly. "And you always know what's going on in my head, right?" I asked.

He smirked a little, and his eyes glinted with quiet mischief. "Yes."

I lowered my gaze. "Then why be so stubborn?"

He only smiled, flipping another page, ignoring my question entirely as he moved to the couch and leaned back into it, focusing on the book again.

“Hukum,” I called softly, following him and standing beside the couch.

“Hmm?” he hummed without looking up.

“Please,” I whispered.

He finally looked up at me. “Please what, baby?”

My heart thudded as I sat beside him and rested my head on his shoulder. He gently leaned his head against mine.

“Humaara mann nahi lagta ab aapke bina, Hukum,”
(I don’t feel like myself without you anymore, Hukum.) I said softly, gazing at the book in his hand.

“Come here,” he murmured, wrapping his arm around my shoulder and pulling me closer.

I pressed my face into his chest, breathing in his scent. He smelled warm and comforting.

I lifted my face to look at him, still reading, and before I could stop myself, I took the book from his hands and placed it aside. “Not now,” I whispered, creasing my brows together.

He cupped my cheek and kissed it lightly. “Just a few pages.”

But I shook my head. “No. You don’t know how much I missed you today. I... I was... my everything was aching for you. I couldn’t even focus on my stitching. There was this constant, consuming urge to be near you... and I can’t even describe it properly.”

He traced the side of my cheek with his thumb and smiled softly. “Really?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“Come here,” he said again, and pulled me gently into his lap. He stretched his legs onto the table, and I rested mine over his. He wrapped his arms around me, interlacing his fingers with mine.

“Tell me more,” he whispered.

“I don’t know... but I’ve been feeling strange lately. I want to be with you, but I’m equally afraid of being with you,” I confessed.

“Why?” he asked gently.

“I don’t know,” I repeated, closing my eyes for a moment as his fingers traced over my bangles.

“It’s like... I’m afraid something irreversible will happen. Like crossing some emotional bridge that I won’t be able to come back from.”

I turned my face up toward him and touched his face with one hand.

As our eyes locked without thinking, I leaned in and brushed my lips against his. My other hand came up to cup his cheek.

He was the one I wanted for the rest of my life. He was the one who changed me, and it felt so good.

As I kissed his cheek, he tightened his arms around me. I kissed him again. And again.

“I love you, Hukum,” I whispered, finally letting it out, and rested my hands against his chest, looking into his eyes.

“Please... I beg you. Touch me. Kiss me. Suck me. Do anything you want. But please... do something.”



28 Ranvijay

The desperation, the restlessness in her tone, the way her voice quivered by the end of her plea, made a wave of joy rush through me. And in the heat of the moment, I cupped her cheek and tilted her face toward mine.

"Say that again," I whispered, holding her gaze. She lowered her eyes, blushing profusely under my stare.

She blinked shyly and murmured, **"Humein aapse prem ho gaya hai, Hukum. Aapke bina jeevan jeena bhi ab asamभव lagta hai."** (I have fallen in love with you. Living life now seems impossible without you.)

I exhaled deeply and couldn't stop myself from pressing my lips to hers, kissing her softly.

"I love you too," I whispered against her lips, feeling the tension between us ignite into something uncontrollable.

She pulled back slightly. Her gaze flickered between my eyes and my mouth as her trembling hands crawled up to cup my neck.

I could say how aroused she was.

She leaned in and captured my lips, slowly at first, but then firmer. Her kiss grew bolder, and when she sucked hard on my lower lip, I felt myself losing control. My hand slid up to her neck, and she gasped against me.

"Hukum..."

I smiled breathlessly as her teeth grazed my lip playfully.

Looking into her wide, hungry eyes, I asked, "Are you feeling wet?" She nodded. "Do you want me to touch you?" I asked again, looking at her agape. Her breath was uneven. She was burning with need.

She paused and nodded once more.

"Use words, my baby," I gently reminded her.

She exhaled in frustration and took my hand, guiding it down slowly from her neck to the top of her chest. Her

bangles jingled as she moved, and her skin felt warm under my fingers. When I reached just above her bosom, she blinked and inhaled sharply.

I bit my lower lip, feeling the rapid beat of her heart under my touch.

And as I pressed my palm against her chest, her eyes fluttered shut, her mouth parted slightly, and I felt her surrender to the sensation.

Her dupatta slipped from her shoulder, and I saw her nipples pressing through the fabric of her blouse.

"Can I see you?" I asked softly.

She hesitated briefly, but then whispered, "Yes."

I pulled her into me, wrapping my arms around her waist, and she buried her face in my shoulder, shivering beneath my touch.

I glanced down and began undoing the strings of her blouse slowly. She shifted a little in my lap as I kissed her shoulder and moved her hair to one side, untying the second set of strings.

The blouse loosened, and I caressed her bare back, feeling its softness under my fingers.

"Hukum..." she breathed near my ear.

As I brought my hand to her shoulder, she looked up at me, blinking nervously.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

She nodded lightly.

I watched her carefully, and when she lowered her gaze, I gently pulled the fabric down from her shoulder. The blouse slipped, revealing the curve of her right breast.

She tensed, her breath quickened, and her brows pulled together slightly as the heat between us grew thicker.

I looked down at the goosebumps covering her skin and the way her body reacted instinctively to my touch.

"You're beautiful," I murmured, tracing her bare chest with my eyes. Her breasts were small yet firm, the dark brown

buds, smaller than the tip of my finger, hardened beneath the air. She was too young, too delicate.

I swallowed hard and leaned in, pressing my lips against her chest. She shivered again, and I met her eyes, only to find her gaze fixed on my hand hovering near her midriff. And as I brought my hand up, touching the swell of her breast, her quavering lips parted.

Her breath hitched when my fingers brushed over her nipple, and she stiffened slightly at the contact.

I smiled, watching her reaction.

“Does my hand feel good here?” I asked quietly.

She met my eyes and nodded timidly. The loose strands of her hair spilt forward, falling across her face.

I slowly brushed her nipple again with my thumb, and she bit down on her lower lip.

Her response stirred something deep within me, making me squeeze her sensitive, aroused tip between my fingers.

A soft cry escaped from her lips, and at the sound of it, my erection tightened, twitching under the fabric.

Breaking our intense eye contact, I leaned down and cupped her nipple with my lips. She arched back, gasping, and I immediately wrapped an arm around her, pulling her closer.

Her body stretched against mine, and her nipple pulled away from my mouth with a wet pop.

Lowering myself, I gave it a gentle lick and again took it in my mouth. As I sank my teeth in lightly, nibbling it, she moaned softly, sending shivers through me.

She gently cupped my cheek, caressing my skin softly, and my eyes fluttered shut.

I pulled her even closer and gently sucked on her tiny, sensitive nipple.

With the sensations deepening between us, her body was no longer under her control, and she surrendered completely.

I drew back, lifting my gaze to meet hers.

She pressed her lips to mine with breathless urgency, then whispered slowly, "I need you, Hukum."

I kissed her deeply, savouring her, and asked, "You need me for what, Aishwarya?"

Her brows knitted together in confusion. "I... I don't know what I want," she whispered, shaking her head. Our foreheads touched, and our breaths tangled. "I just want you with me. The way you always are. I want you closer, to touch me, to hold me. There's this... ache, a pull inside me for you. I don't know what it is. I find it hard to describe."

I kissed her lips again and whispered, "Tell me when that ache becomes unbearable. When you can't hold it in even for a moment."

She sighed, frustrated, and as she looked at me, pain and longing swirled in her eyes.

"Aise to humaare praan chale jaayenge, Hukum,"
(My soul might leave me this way, Hukum.)

I kissed her again and muttered, ***"Jaane do. kahaan jaayenge... lautkar to humaare paas hi aayenge."*** (Let it leave. Where will it go? It will return to me eventually.)

She blinked at me in confusion.

"Aap humaare saath aisa kyun kar rahein hain, Hukum? Acche se samajhte hain... uske uparaant bhi kyun nahi samajhte kya chaahiye humein?" (Why are you doing this to me? You know me so well. Why can't you understand what I want?)

The yearning was palpable in her voice, and so her words hit hard.

She crashed her lips onto mine possessively, with an intent to dominate me. The fervour of this kiss was harsh and rough, as if she were punishing me for not understanding what she wanted.

I held her tightly by her nape and pulled away slightly, then lifted her in my arms.

"Patience, Aishwarya," I murmured near her lips. "We always get what we want only when we're ready to handle

it. I know what you want. But you're not ready yet, baby."

Her chest heaved rapidly, and her body was exposed and shaking as I placed her on the bed.

She held my wrist and sat up, pleading with me with her eyes.

My heartbeat had lost its rhythm. She was bare, utterly surrendered before me. Her eyes were heavy with desire... craving love and craving me, voicing her wants.

And yet, I didn't know what to do. All I knew was, one more moment, and I'd lose whatever control I had left.

But I also didn't want to hurt her in this moment, when her mind was clouded with desire and confusion.

I wanted to take her when she was ready, when she would surrender to me, not out of longing, but from a place of strength. The version of her that would be independent, self-loving, and confident. I wanted that moment to be filled with absolute trust, freedom, and peace.

Because this Aishwarya was still young, fragile, and vulnerable, her emotions were unsteady, more like a cry for love than love itself.

She was seeking the kind of love from me that her family had failed to give her.

And I didn't want to become the person she clung to, the one she gave her everything to just to fill that void. I didn't want to be the man she waited for all day, just to catch a glimpse of.

But in that moment, I wanted to give myself to her completely. To fulfil every wish in her eyes, to hold her close and never let go.

Because my Aishwarya had just confessed her love to me, she had finally bared her heart to me.

The pure innocence in her eyes made me pull her close and gently lay her over me.

She took a deep breath as I leaned into the curve of her neck, and her fingers curled around my arm. I could feel her melting under my touch.

I traced her skin with soft, lingering kisses, tasting the warmth of her neck, and she tilted her head to the side, offering more, as I deepened each kiss.

It was hard for both of us. The urge to tear away the remaining layers between us clouded my mind completely. And knowing just how breathtaking she was only made it harder to hold back.

She was beautiful, not just in the moment, but always, even when fully clothed.

My lips lowered to her heaving chest and left a trail of wet kisses from her breasts to her midriff.

She quivered under me, clenching onto the bedsheet as I tasted her skin.

"Suck me, please," she whispered, pressing her thighs together.

I pulled back and glanced at her legs. With the red mahavar on her toes, the anklets, and the toe rings, her feet looked beautiful.

I gently lifted her foot, kissed her toes, and placed it on my chest. She tried to pull away, but I stopped her.

I unhooked her anklets and placed them aside. She straightened up and then, without a word, touched my feet softly with her fingers... and kissed them.

My chest clenched at the sight.

I touched her neck and eased her down again. I lifted her skirt slowly, to her knees, then higher. Her legs were trembling delicately.

"Calm down," I murmured against her thigh.

"Hukum," she whispered.

I looked up. "Are you comfortable? Do you want me to stop?"

She shook her head slowly.

Her eyes met mine. I touched her neck softly, then gently guided her to lie back as my gaze dropped to her feet.

My fingers found the hem of her skirt, and I dragged it up to her knees. I could feel her shivering at my moves.

Her legs were beautiful and spotless. I ran my fingers lightly along her calf and leaned forward to press a soft kiss there. She shifted at my touch, and I instinctively tightened my hold on her.

There were tiny, delicate hairs on her legs. It was so feminine and divine.

I kissed her calves, her knees, then moved to her thighs. She rested her hand on my wrist, right over her belly. Gently, I lifted her skirt a little higher, up to her upper thighs.

Her body shuddered under me.

"Calm down," I murmured against the warm skin of her inner thigh.

"Hukum..." she whispered, and I lifted my gaze to meet hers.

"Are you comfortable?" I asked softly. "Do you want me to stop?"

She shook her head, locking her eyes with mine. "No, don't stop... please," she muttered, shivering uncontrollably.

I lowered my lips to the crown of her core.

She inhaled sharply as my lips touched her, and in the flare of impulse, she parted her legs even wider, tightening her grip around my wrist.

When I looked up and found her eyes on me, I began with a slow, teasing lick.

Her lips parted with a faint tremble, and her gaze softened.

Her reaction made my arousal throb with an aching want, and I couldn't help but close my eyes and suck her softly.

She arched her head back, moving her hips in rhythm with my mouth as I deepened it slowly.

Her breathing grew uneven, and she dug her toes into the mattress.

I bit her gently, drawing a trembling moan from her.

Her voice felt like honey in my ears, and I kept sucking her deeply as if nothing else in the world mattered.

Watching her moan softly with pleasure, inhaling deeply, her hips rolling against me... it filled me with a strange sense of pride.

What have I done to this timid, innocent girl?

The same girl who hadn't dared meet my eyes or anyone else's on her very first day in the palace was now threading her fingers through my hair, clutching tight, overwhelmed by whatever I was doing to her.

I slowed my pace intentionally, wanting her to truly feel and understand everything happening to her. She was succumbing to my touch so willingly.

I kept sucking her gently, swirling my tongue along her wet curves until her body arched, and her lower abdomen trembled under my hold. Her thighs quivered, instinctively trying to press together.

I lifted my face to look at her.

"Should I push my finger in?" I asked softly.

She nodded almost instantly.

"Oh... yes... please..." she whispered, and I felt her knees trembling beside my torso.

I licked my middle finger, wetting it before gently easing it in. She was so tight, and her inner walls clenched around my finger.

She let out a loud moan as I crept my finger inside, and I paused, giving her time to adjust to the foreign sensation.

After a few moments, I asked gently, "Does it feel good?"

She nodded. "Yes."

At her response, I smiled and kissed her inner thigh. "Should I move it? Just a little?" I asked.

"Yes... slow..." she stammered, and I smiled again, as she was beginning to understand her own desire.

I obeyed, moving my finger slowly, just as she'd asked, and watched her grip her hair, arching her head back as she tried to suppress her moans but couldn't.

I moved gently, easing my finger in and out, listening to the quiet cries she couldn't hold in. I curled my finger,

brushing against her from within.

"Tell me... where does it feel good, Aishwarya?" I asked, watching her expression closely.

She just nodded breathlessly. "Yes..."

I smiled, caressing her skin.

She was wet, her body surrendered to each movement with growing ease. The first few strokes met no reaction, but then, when my finger brushed a particular spot, her knees instantly pulled up tight and she let out a louder moan.

I tightened my hold on her waist, steadying her so that I wouldn't lose that exact place. "Calm down," I murmured, stilling her just enough.

I kept caressing her there, slowly, gently, until she began to shiver uncontrollably. And in no time, she released.

"Oh, my goodness..." she gasped, and I slowly pulled my finger out.

She looked at me and sat up quickly. Placing her hands on my shoulders, she leaned in and kissed me with a sense of urgency. Her breath came in short, panting waves, but there was a raw, unmistakable dominance in her strength that echoed louder than any words.

I immediately wrapped my arms around her and pulled her onto my lap.

My head tilted back as she kissed me harder, sucking my lips with a hunger I hadn't yet seen in her.

"Aishwarya," I breathed softly, cupping her cheek with care.

She pressed her forehead against mine, panting heavily. "It feels so calm suddenly," as she murmured, her warm, uneven breaths brushed against my face.

"Do you like it... calm like this?" I asked in a low voice.

She nodded. "Yes... very much. I love it," she whispered between breaths.

I pushed her down onto the bed, lowering myself over her, and she wrapped her arms around me, tucking one leg around my thigh.

I kissed her cheek tenderly, caressing her until her breathing steadied.

The storm of desire faded from our minds, replaced by a soft quiet. She looked into my eyes, timidly at first, but there was a distinct glow on her beautiful face. Then came a shy smile.

“Does everyone do that, Hukum?” she asked softly.

I nodded. “Yes.”

She lowered her gaze and asked in a low, hesitant voice, “Just that?”

I raised my eyebrows slightly, then smiled at her. “Yes... just that.”

She let out a light chuckle and shook her head. “No... Jiji told me something,” she said.

Frowning, I asked, “What?”

Her fingers began tracing slow, nervous patterns on my arm, and her gaze fixed on them. “Something... I mean, I don’t know if it’s good or bad. But... it sounded different,” she whispered.

I shifted to lie beside her as she lowered her skirt and sat up, tying the blouse strap back over her shoulder.

I sat up to help her tie the strings of her blouse while she nervously scratched her nails.

Once I was done, she turned to look at me, but I took hold of her wrist and pulled her down onto the bed again.

Wrapping my arms around her waist, I drew her closer. Her back pressed against my chest, and I could feel the calm in her body.

Propping my head on one hand, I looked at her as she timidly glanced at me over her shoulder.

“She told me that when she was leaving for her maternal home, Ranaji did...” Her voice trailed off, but her words were enough to convey her meaning.

My expression shifted from shock to embarrassment. I felt like dying in that moment. She just looked at me shyly, still curious.

I lowered my gaze and kissed her cheek.

"Baby," I whispered, "don't you think you should keep the secrets someone shares with you in trust?"

She turned her face toward me. "Yes, I know... but I can't hide anything from you," she mumbled. "I know you won't tell anyone. I mean, I couldn't ask her the exact reason, but you can tell me, right?" Her voice was innocently low.

I nodded, kissing her cheek gently. "Yes."

"Umm... I think it's for pleasure," I said quietly. Her eyes held a glimmer of both timidity and trust as she gazed into mine.

"Will you do that to me, too... if I go to Songarh?" she asked in a slow voice. I bit my lower lip, holding back a smile.

Leaning closer, I touched my nose to hers. "Do you want me to do it?"

She blinked nervously, lowering her gaze to my neck. As she began playing with the red thread around it, her bangles made a soft, tinkling sound with each movement.

"I don't know," she replied quietly, and I kissed her forehead with a soft smile.

We kept gazing at each other with warmth, sharing quiet kisses. She giggled in my arms, still playing with the collar of my kurta and the thread around my neck.

"When are you thinking of starting your business?" I asked.

She lifted her gaze to mine. "Our business," she corrected. I chuckled. "Our business?"

"Yes. You and I, with Jiji, Ranaji, Devar-sa, Moni... and everyone who wants to be a part of it."

I was genuinely impressed. "So... how are you planning to begin?"

"A lot of women already work in the palace," she said. "I'll tell Jiji first. I've already finished that dupatta for her. I have a few more. Then I'll ask her to help me gather a group of women who can stitch for me."

I nodded, encouraging her. "And what about the designs and pricing? Where do you want to sell them?"

She inhaled deeply. "I got the chance to think about it at the market. Some designs in those shops were nice, but they lacked finishing. I liked a few, but most had unbalanced, faded colour combinations. So... I'm thinking of starting something different that holds a meaning behind it."

She gave me an earnest look. "Just like we all have stories, colours help us connect with them. Like Jiji looks beautiful and bold in red, but when she wears yellow, she seems softer, gentler. So imagine a yellow blouse, a lehenga with a red border and thread work, and a red dupatta... it would look both elegant and striking." She paused, then asked, "What do you think?"

I raised my brows in disbelief, still awed. This was my Aishwarya.

"It's amazing," I said quietly.

She giggled. "But I'll ask Jiji for an honest review. You always call me beautiful anyway," she teased, laughing softly at the end.

I exhaled deeply and suddenly straightened up, taking her hand. "Come with me."

She frowned in confusion. "But... Hukum? Where? I'm sorry..." I helped her down from the bed. "But what happened?" she asked worriedly.

I led her inside the dressing room and made her stand in front of the mirror.

I stood behind her, watching her face illuminated by the warm glow of the lamps' light.

"Tell me," I said, "why do you think you're not beautiful?"

She looked at me through the mirror, startled.

Her smile had faded. "Hukum..." she whispered.

I inhaled deeply and reached for the end of her braid, slowly untying it. She didn't protest as I ran my fingers

through the dark waves of her hair, letting them cascade all the way down to her hips.

Gently, I pressed her left shoulder and moved her hair over to the right. She inhaled softly as her delicate, sensual collarbones came into view.

“Dekho, Aishwarya,” (Look at yourself.) I leaned closer, brushing my cheek against hers, and felt her heart pounding. “Tell me one thing that isn’t beautiful about you.” Her lashes fluttered rapidly when she looked up. “Just lift your chin... and look at yourself like you’re the most beautiful girl in the world.”

She stared at herself silently.

“These eyes... deeper than the ocean yet as innocent and soft as the clouds,” I whispered. “These lips... like soft rose petals. I could look at them for a lifetime, even if they dried or faded.” I touched her arms gently. “And as for your skin tone...”

A pause lingered between us as her gaze slowly met mine in the mirror.



29 Aishwarya

I felt a shiver travel through my nerves as his fingers traced along my arms, slow enough to make every fine hair rise in reverence.

“Hukum...” I couldn’t help but breathe slowly.

“Do you have any idea how much I love brown, and every single shade of brown that belongs to you?” he whispered it so close to my cheek that I could feel the warmth of his breath brushing against my skin.

His nose gently poked my cheek, and his parted lips lingered maddeningly close. I didn’t know why, but his body always turned hot when we came close, like his temperature rose with every inch between us disappearing.

“How much?” I asked softly.

He parted his lips and suddenly bit down on my cheek, making me wince with a sharp inhale and blink rapidly.

“Like I can’t exist without you anymore. Like life would be too empty if you ever left. Like I’d lose myself forever if you went away. Like I wouldn’t even be able to breathe if there was no you in my home,” he murmured.

I fluttered my eyelashes, trying to make sense of his words. My heart understood it, but my mind was still trying to catch up.

“Umm... means?” I asked slowly.

He slid his hand from my collarbone to the back of my neck. My lips parted and my head tilted slightly back as he pressed his palm gently against my throat.

He took a deep breath, then lifted his gaze to look at me through the mirror.

“Have you seen the plants?” he asked, and I nodded.

“Yes, plants... trees, nature... life,” I said with slight pauses.

He nodded faintly. “What gives life to them?”

I blinked in confusion. "A seed?"

"And?"

"Soil... water... sun," I muttered hesitantly.

He nodded again. "Soil. People praise the water and sun for giving us life, but they forget the most important part: the soil. Mother Earth. She's forgotten, but she's essential. And the most beautiful... brown."

I lowered my gaze. "So... you think I'm soil?" I asked slowly.

He smiled slightly. "Debatable," he said, "but I think the most beautiful things, the roots of life, are brown. And people tend to ignore that. Have you looked at the tree trunks? The mountains? Riverbeds even? These are the things that give life, that's steady and real, and that are grounding. And they're all brown. Even the most beautiful colours blend into brown. Brown gives life. It's us. It's reality. It's everywhere. And it never tries to steal attention. It gives the spotlight to others."

His fingers moved gently from my neck to my shoulder, tracing along my arm to the tips of my fingers.

"But brown..." he continued softly, "... is silence. Brown is innocence. Brown is calm... and brown is destruction. Brown is life. It's a deep love that begins when the fake one ends. Brown is Aishwarya. And Aishwarya is life beyond mere survival. Only the brave love brown. Only the luckiest get brown. And for me, brown is the true goddess, the one who is nature, destruction, life... and mine."

His words sank into me like sunlight on cold skin. I inhaled deeply, trying to picture everything he'd just said.

"Brown is destruction?" I asked quietly.

He nodded. "Yes. Have you seen floods?"

I shook my head.

He touched my fingers gently with his own. "Calm water is blue," he said. "But when the flood comes, the same water turns brown... and wrathful."

I smiled faintly. "But I'm no life. No nature. No destruction. Just dull... and nonexistent among all the beauty."

He exhaled and turned me to face him, lifting my chin so that I met his gaze.

"You are more than life, more than nature, and far more dangerous than destruction, Aishwarya. You just haven't stepped out of the shell you've been forced into. The one you call destiny. All you need is to look at yourself the way I see you."

I stared into his deep, warm eyes, glowing even in the darkness surrounding us.

I smiled a little and asked, "So... have you always wanted a brown girl? Or are you just saying all this to me?"

He smiled and pulled me into him, pressing a kiss onto my forehead.

"I didn't want anything before you," he whispered, "but now, all I want... is you, for this life, and for six more."

I chuckled softly.

"You love me this much?" I spoke in a low voice, and he responded with a small smile and a nod.

"Yes." He inhaled a deep breath. "Now, you should go to bed and sleep tight."

I frowned slightly. "Why? You're not coming to bed?"

He swallowed slowly and shook his head. "Umm... you know the construction on the outskirts of the palace has begun. I need to monitor it and check the records, just to make sure everything's on track," he said gently.

A tightness formed in the pit of my chest. He was going to be busy again. I nodded, and he smiled, holding my hand and guiding me toward the bedroom.

My thoughts wouldn't settle. Everything that had just happened, everything Jiji told me, and then, him being away again. It all swirled in my head as we walked back in silence.

He stopped near the bed and smiled, gesturing toward it. "Good night, Aishwarya."

I looked at the empty bed and blinked slowly before turning to look at him again.

Who's more comforting? Yes... Hukum.

"I don't want to sleep."

He raised his eyebrows. "But why? It's late. You need rest."

I lowered my gaze, unsure of how to explain what I was feeling. But all I understood was that I wanted to be with him. His presence made my heart lighter. His warmth made me feel safe. Without him, I felt... alone.

"I want to be with you."

He sighed and gave a soft smile. "You are with me. See? We're married. This is our chamber, that's our bed, and you're going to sleep here while I study, just a few feet away."

He gently nudged me on the shoulders, urging me to sit on the bed. "Lie down, Aishwarya. Sleep."

I reluctantly lay down, feeling frustration blooming inside me, and looked at him. "I hate you," I muttered under my breath.

"I heard that," he replied.

I immediately lowered my gaze. "Sorry."

He chuckled softly and pulled the comforter up, lovingly tucking it over me. "Sleep tight, baby," he whispered.

I closed my eyes and nodded. "Ji."

But the moment his hand left my arm, I opened my eyes again. I watched him walk to the couch and pick up his book. The chamber was dim, but the soft table lamp lit him in a way that made him look almost celestial.

"Close your eyes, Aishwarya," he called out from there.

I sighed in annoyance. Sleep wasn't even on my mind. My body still remembered him kissing me, him sucking me; him touching me. My mind kept replaying his closeness. Every inch of me ached for him.

I tried to control my wandering mind and sleep, which seemed next to impossible.

I tossed aside the blanket and then finally sat up.

He looked up from his book. "What?" he asked.

Grabbing the comforter in my arms, I marched over to him and dropped it on the empty side of the couch.

"I'll lie here," I said.

He raised an eyebrow, amused. "Won't it be uncomfortable?"

I shook my head and sat beside him. "No. The empty bed is what makes me uncomfortable."

He smirked. "So, you will not let me read?"

"I didn't say that," I replied. "I just want to be with you while you read. That's all."

He exhaled slowly and shook his head, then closed the book and shifted. He placed a pillow against one armrest and lay back, stretching out along the length of the couch: one leg down, the other bent at the knee, giving me enough space.

Then he opened his arms. "Come here."

My back rested against his chest as he pulled me close, adjusting my hair gently to the side so I could nestle in more comfortably.

I exhaled deeply, surrendering to the warmth that spread through my entire body. Pulling the comforter over both of us, I closed my eyes. "Now I feel like sleeping."

His chin rested against the side of my head. "And I feel restrained," he said in a low voice.

I smiled. "Why? Is something happening to you?"

He cupped my jaw and ran his thumb slowly across my lower lip. A few seconds passed in silence before he whispered, "You don't have the slightest idea, baby... do you?"

I turned slightly to look at him. "Do you want me to touch your... scroll?" I asked timidly.

He just stared at me quietly, then shook his head slowly. "You should rest."

He brushed his finger along my lips again. I blinked, staring down at his slightly parted mouth, then back up into his eyes.

"I always rest. Give me something to do," I whispered.

He looked deep into my eyes. "What kind of work do you want to do?"

His voice sent a thousand unnamed emotions rushing through me. I didn't even know how, but he always brought out something in me, something honest and real. I could say anything to him, no matter how awkward, selfish, or absurd it might be. I wanted to say it to him.

"Anything," I said.

And somewhere in the back of my mind, images started forming. And scenarios of what he might say. Each of them made me feel nervous and vulnerable... and yet, for the first time in my life, I wanted to feel all of it, even if it was wrong, even if it was a sin.

I wanted to be a sinner if it meant having him.

He caught his lower lip between his teeth, and a small smile tugged at the corner. His gaze dropped to my lips, then he rolled his head back with a sigh.

"Aishwarya... Aishwarya... my baby," he groaned softly. "You don't even know what you're saying."

I bit my lip as a strange, warm pressure bloomed in my lower belly. I watched his throat move as he swallowed hard.

"I mean it, Hukum. Tell me what you want to do with me."

He angled his gaze back at me. His eyes held an unreadable intensity. He stared for a few moments, then lowered his eyes to my lips and traced them slowly with his thumb.

"You tell me," he whispered. "What do you think I want to do with you?"

A warm blush crept up my cheeks as I struggled to find the words.

I lowered my gaze as the visuals of what Jiji had told me about biting him back, about... pleasing him, blurred my

thoughts. I sucked my lower lip, unsure whether I should say anything.

What if I'm wrong? What if he didn't mean what I meant?

I took a frustrated breath and shook my head. "I don't know. I mean, I know you want me to work on the business, make a name for myself, and love myself the way I am, but..."

I trailed off, realising I was blabbering. I wanted to say something else, but not knowing where his thoughts were, I tried to keep my words safe.

He smiled a little and lifted my chin gently, making me look into his eyes. "That I do want, no doubt. But what do you think I want right now?" His voice was slow and teasing.

I blinked nervously, staring into his eyes. They were soft yet mischievous... almost devilish.

"Give me a hint?" I asked, touching the base of his neck with my finger.

He just smiled. "Do a wild guess, Aishwarya."

I looked down at my finger tracing slow circles on his skin, trying to gather courage. My mind was torn between two thoughts.

One was what Jiji said about giving a love bite. And the other... The other was more intense, about taking him in my mouth. Just the thought made my throat go dry. I swallowed hard and blushed.

"Hukum, I.. I think... I mean, I think..." I stammered to find the right words, but none came out. My mind refused to form them.

He continued brushing his fingers along my chin, waiting.

Unable to handle it, I suddenly straightened up and pushed my hair behind my ear. "I'm feeling sleepy now," I muttered, trying to escape.

But before I could move too far, I felt his hand wrap firmly around my wrist, making me freeze. My bangles tinkled under his grip.

Slowly, I turned to look at him. The short strands of my hair swayed across my face. I glanced down at his hand holding mine... then met his gaze.

He was looking deeply, sharply into my eyes, and it felt as if we were having a whole conversation in silence.

A part of me wished he would pull me back to him. But another part trembled, knowing he still hadn't told me what he wanted. His hold on my wrist softened, then finally slipped away.

"Good night," he said in a low voice.

A tightness spread through my chest. I looked down and stood there quietly for a few more moments. He didn't say anything, just kept looking at me. Eventually, I stepped back toward the bed and lay down under the comforter.

Closing my eyes, I tried to calm the storm in my chest. But my thoughts refused to settle.

Just a while ago, we had been so close. He kissed me... even there. And now? Now it felt like he was pushing me away.

I breathed in deeply. But why was he pushing me away? Or... was it just in my mind?

Maybe it was only my imagination. I mean, even if I had stayed longer with him, what would've happened?

Still, something in me believed there was something more. Something deeper. Something intense was waiting for me.

I tried to shake the thoughts, but they clung to me until I drifted into a restless sleep.



The next morning was no different. He wasn't in the chamber.

After finishing my morning routine and prayers, I focused on my sewing and design work. I kept hoping he would come for lunch, but he didn't.

Even though I didn't want to, I had to force myself to stay focused. With Moni's help, I managed to sew half a dupatta. She kept me company the entire time, stuffing my ears with palace gossip, most of which I barely paid attention to.

My eyes kept drifting toward the sun outside, secretly wishing the day would end, wishing he would return.

Finally, the evening came, and I heard him entering the chamber.

I packed my things neatly into the trunk and walked back toward the bedroom from the courtyard.

He lifted his tired eyes from the couch, where he had placed his overcoat, and looked at me.

"Are you okay, Hukum?" I asked softly.

Taking a deep breath, he walked over and wrapped his arms around me.

I immediately closed my eyes, melting into his warmth.

"Yes, are you okay?" he asked, pressing a soft kiss to my head.

I felt tears stinging the corners of my eyes. "Are you ignoring me, Hukum?" I asked before I could stop myself.

"What?" He chuckled and answered, "No. Why do you even think that?"

I pulled away from the hug and looked at him. "I don't know... but it feels like it."

Shaking his head, he made me look into his eyes. "It's just work, Aishwarya," he said, placing a soft kiss on my forehead.

I closed my eyes for a moment, then opened them to meet his gaze. "I hate work."

He chuckled and asked in a low voice, "Have you had dinner?"

I shook my head.

Holding my hand, he pulled me toward the couch and made me sit beside him. I rested my head on his shoulder with my eyes closed. I didn't know why, but I wanted to stay close to him all the time.

“So... how was your day?” he asked.

I opened my eyes and looked up at him from his shoulder. “I’m creating something new,” I said, smiling widely.

“Really? Show me!”

I shook my head quickly. “No, no, no. It’s not finished yet!”

He smiled at my excitement. “Then at least tell me what it’s about?”

I glanced at the attendants setting the dinner plates on the table and smiled back at him. “Umm... that’s a surprise too.”

He chuckled again. Once the attendants stepped away, he made a bite and held it out to me, but I shook my head softly.

“Pehle aap grahan kijiye,” (You eat first.)

He smiled and shook his head. **“Aap lijiye. Humein accha lagta hai aapko bhojan ka anand leta dekh.”** (You eat. I enjoy watching you eat.)

He brought the bite closer to my mouth, and I opened my mouth and accepted it without protest.

He smiled as I chewed, and I made a bite for him in return. “Now, you too.”

He opened his mouth and took it gently from my hand. His hair was falling over his forehead, and he looked tired. There were slight dark circles under his eyes, but somehow, he looked even more attractive that way.

“Tiredness suits you,” I whispered, unable to stop myself.

He smirked. “It’ll suit you too.”

I furrowed my brows playfully. “I don’t get tired. I mean, who gets tired from sitting around sewing clothes?”

He made another bite and fed me again, smiling. “Oh, my baby...”

Sometimes, I didn’t understand what he meant, but I still took the bite from his fingers.

We kept feeding each other like that, laughing and stealing glances. After dinner, I studied with him. He taught me many new things. One that intrigued me was writing

two-letter words. It wasn't easy at first, but after five or six tries, I got a hold of them.

He focused mainly on his work while I tried to stay focused on mine. It got past midnight, and I let out a heavy yawn while watching him stare hard at a letter.

"Is everything okay?" I asked softly.

He hummed without lifting his gaze.

I bit my lower lip. Something wasn't right.

"Tell me, Hukum," I whispered, even though part of me feared he didn't want to.

This time, as he looked up, I blinked nervously.

"Umm... it's something about Agastya," he mumbled, still unsure if he should share.

I tilted my head slightly. "What about Devar-sa?"

He sucked in his lower lip. "He sent me a letter secretly. He said he had found a girl for himself. But her father... doesn't like us. I mean, Suryagarh."

My brows creased together. "Why?"

He looked at me and spoke. "A lot of new laws have been passed. And since Bhai-sa won Suryagarh, many old engagements and alliances have broken off. There's no longer a need for them. So, some kings turned against us."

I took a slow breath. "But that shouldn't affect the girl's life. If she likes Devar-sa, her parents should agree for her happiness. Devar-sa is so nice."

He stared at me for a few seconds and asked, "Devar-sa is nice? You've never said so about me."

"I've never said it to him either. I'm telling you."

He smiled. "Fair enough. Seems like someone is getting good with words."

I smiled too. "I've started to understand you a little."

He looked at me with curiosity. "Tell me, what do you know about me?"

"What do you want me to tell?"

He lowered his gaze back to the letter and asked, "My favourite food?"

“Daal-Baati-Choorma.” I answered in a beat.

He smiled again. “Favourite colour other than brown?”

“White.”

Another smile. “Favourite pastime?”

“Books.”

He looked up at me this time. His gaze sharpened just a little, but his jaw relaxed.

“Things I hate?”

I hesitated, but then said, “Disloyalty... too much chaos and noise... and pickles.”

He laughed softly. “Pickles?”

I nodded. “Yes. You never eat pickles. You don’t even like your roti if even a little pickle is smeared on it.”

He gave an appreciative nod and lightly bit his lower lip.

“And what am I thinking right now?” he asked.

I lowered my gaze, smiling. “You’re thinking of sleeping because you’re sleepy now.” I let out a small laugh, but he clicked his tongue and shook his head.

“Wrong answer.”

I laughed harder as he swiftly packed his belongings and put them away.

“That means punishment.”

I stood up, grinning. “Punishment? I don’t remember agreeing to that.”

He smiled with those playful eyes and stepped toward me. I stepped back as he came closer.

“Last question,” he said, and I nodded.

“Yes?”

He came so close I could feel the warmth of his breath. My back hit the bedpost, and he inched forward slowly, locking his eyes on mine.

“The thing I love the most?”

I smiled softly. “That’s the easiest question.”

He touched my waist and gently pulled me closer until my stomach met his. I saw the curve of a smile appear on his face.

“What is it?” he asked in a low voice.

I lifted my hands and held up my wrists for him to see, moving my forearms slightly.

He chuckled. “I thought you would say yourself.”

I laughed lightly and shook my head. “I’m not a thing, Hukum. See...” I took a deep breath in front of him and exhaled dramatically. “I inhale and exhale.”

He smiled and gently took hold of my wrists with his warm hands. I smiled again, but this time it faded slightly as I saw him lean down to press a kiss against the golden bangles.

“How do you know?” he asked, placing a trail of tender kisses.

“You have a habit of tracing them,” I said softly. “When you’re nervous, when you’re happy, when you’re calm. It’s like... they ground you, calm you down, give you peace.”

He said nothing at first, just stared into my eyes.

“It’s not just the bangles, Aishwarya,” he finally said. “It’s the warmth of the person who used to wear them once. And the one who wears them now.”

My smile weakened at his answer. “You miss your mother so much.”

A tender smile touched his lips. “Every child does. A mother isn’t just a human; she’s an emotion. A child feels his mother even before he knows God.”

I stared into his eyes silently, since I had no memories of my own.

“Sadly, I know nothing about my mother,” I said quietly. ā

His gaze softened as he cradled my cheek. His warmth instantly soothed me, and I closed my eyes, letting my face lean into his touch.

“I’m sure she would’ve been exactly like you,” he said.

I smiled faintly. “I can’t say anything. I don’t even remember the slightest thing about her. I was her first and last child. And no one in Songarh ever spoke of her. It’s like... she never even existed.”

He inhaled deeply and stepped closer. His arms coiled around me, and he gently stroked my back. The gesture felt so... safe.

No, I wasn't feeling like crying. You don't weep for someone you never knew. Even so, a void remained.

"But... I do know one thing about her," I said.

He whispered, "What is it?"

I pulled back from the hug and lowered my gaze.

"My eldest sister once told another that Father only kept my mother in hopes of a son. But she gave him a daughter instead, and she died. He never forgave her."

His hand lifted my chin gently. "Their loss," he murmured. "But if I ever get to choose... I'll choose a baby girl as our firstborn."

I frowned in confusion. "You can't choose?"

I stepped back slightly. He gave a small smile, furrowing his brows, and shook his head.

"I don't know if I can. I mean... everything I've studied says the gender of a baby is in God's hands. You and I can't choose what we want."

I blinked, still processing it. "Not even I can decide?"

He shook his head. "No. Trust me. If women had that power, this world would only have boys."

I chuckled. "No. I think there would be only girls."

He lowered his gaze and shook his head again.

"That's where you're wrong, Aishwarya. Women are women's worst enemies."

I inhaled deeply. "Oh."

I didn't fully understand it... but I felt there were reasons behind his words. I had yet to learn the reasons.

"But... I have to ask you something," I said.

He smiled, looking at me as he trod around the bed and took off his kurta.

"Yes?"

His voice was calm, and I watched him sit on the edge of the bed. I nervously walked over and sat beside him, facing

him. The flickering candlelight fell across his face, casting soft shadows on his cheekbones and jaw. His bare shoulders looked strong under the dim gold glow.

My eyes, unintentionally, lowered to his chest and those massive biceps for a moment before I met his gaze again, trying to piece my thoughts into a sentence.

“How... how will the baby get inside me?” I asked hesitantly. “I mean... I know it happens because of seeds, as I recall being very young when I asked one of my pregnant sisters how she got a baby inside her womb. And she laughed and said her husband gave her his seeds. But... if not from the mouth, then how did she get those seeds inside?” I was very cautious with my words and looked at him to decipher his reaction, since it all felt... so wrong to say out loud.

But he didn’t laugh. Instead, he smiled gently. “I’ll tell you. But you have to promise me you won’t faint after hearing it. And you won’t freak out either.”

I frowned. “Why would I faint or freak out? I mean, every woman goes through it, right? They get pregnant after marriage.” I let out a small nervous laugh, but he smirked knowingly.

“Alright,” he said, “but first, tell me, how do you think the baby comes out of the womb? I’m sure you don’t believe it comes out of one’s mouth, right?”

I thinned my eyebrows.

His words were strange... and it hit me that I had never thought about that before.

Yes, I’d seen my sisters suddenly return home with swollen bellies. Married, and within months, carrying babies. But... how did the baby come out?

If not the mouth... then how?

I tried to think and picture it. *My sister... sitting uncomfortably in the courtyard with her giant belly.*

And then it hit me.

A flash of memory of our cow giving birth one stormy night back at the palace crossed my mind. With the rain pouring, the cow's loud cries, her legs shivering, her body struggling as something large tried to come out of her...

Goosebumps raced up my arms as I gaped at Hukum.

My throat went dry. I blinked nervously, then whispered, "Through... poop? Oh my God."

He smiled slightly, watching me. "Not just poop," he said, "but pee too, Aishwarya. In humans, it's both."

A metallic taste rose in my throat. "Both?" I asked, swallowing hard.

I knew I did those things from different places.

He nodded.

"No, that can't be possible. How can a baby come from two different places?" I asked in disbelief.

He bit his lower lip, then lifted a hand as if to explain. "Physicians use a sharp, small blade to cut the lining, so that the baby can come out more easily. If it's not already torn naturally, they have to cut it."

My eyes widened, and I stood up from the bed instantly, feeling a shiver jolting through my spine.

"No," I muttered in protest.

"Yes," he replied calmly. "I learnt all of this in my medicine classes."

I shook my head, utterly horrified. *That's... senselessly painful. They cut it?*

"It bleeds, yes. And it hurts."

He reached for my wrist and pulled me back toward him. "You bleed every month, don't you? That hurts too, right?"

My eyes shot open in shock. "How do you know that?"

He smiled, as though my reaction amused him. "I know, Aishwarya."

I stared at him in disbelief. "But... how? Who told you? Jiji? Moni?"

He sighed, visibly unimpressed. "Shut up."

My mouth fell open. "Why?! I want to know how you know!"

He didn't answer in words. Instead, he pulled me closer until I plopped down on his thighs. He wrapped his arm protectively around me.

"I learnt it in medicine too," he replied quietly.

I frowned. "But why would they teach boys such things?"

He exhaled heavily. "Knowledge has no gender, Aishwarya. You can learn about boys, too."

I sighed, clearly losing the argument, if it even was one.

I took a slow breath, tracing my fingers on the collar of his kurta. He looked at me again.

"So... how do the seeds go in?" I asked quietly, still confused. "I understand now that it's not the mouth... but then how? Do physicians put the seeds inside? Do they use any equipment? And will it be a lady or a man doing that? And... will it hurt?" I shot a list of questions back-to-back.

He lowered his head, trying to hide the smile on his face, and I narrowed my eyes at him, completely confused.

"That will be only my job, Aishwarya," he said, and I thinned my brows.

"Oh... but how will you put those in me so that it turns into a baby?" I asked, still trying to piece together what he was saying.

He sucked on his lower lip while looking at me, and then replied slowly, "Directly."

I frowned even deeply, staring at him. "Directly?"

He nodded, biting his lip as he held my gaze. "Directly," he repeated calmly. Too calmly.

"Directly?" I echoed again, still not understanding. My mind was spinning.

He held my hand gently and added a little weight to his voice. "Directly, Aishwarya."

I stared at him, more confused than ever. "Directly, Hukum?"

He inhaled deeply, then lowered his gaze to our joined hands. His fingers brushed against mine.

"Do you remember... my finger... between your thighs?" he asked quietly.

My breath hitched. I gulped and nodded nervously. "So... you'll use your finger?" I asked, feeling my heart pound heavily in my chest.

He shook his head slowly. A soft chuckle escaped him before his eyes met mine again. He leaned closer, and a few moments passed in silence. Then he said, "No. But you can imagine it as me... replacing my finger... with the... scroll."

My eyes widened in disbelief. I immediately stood up from his lap.

"Are you out of your mind?" The words flew out of my mouth without thinking.

He stared at me with a straight face. "What?" His eyes narrowed at mine. "What did you just say?"

I bit my lip hard and shook my head. "I'm sorry, but what the hell did you just say? You're joking, right?" I let out a nervous laugh and looked at him.

But his face didn't match mine. He shook his head with a slow, painful smirk.

My laugh faded instantly.

He stood up from the bed, and I instinctively stepped back.

"Ohhh, ohhhhh! But don't you think it's too big?" I said, gesturing wildly. "I mean, look at me, look at our physiques. I'm so small!"

He smirked. "Yeah, I'm definitely looking at how small you are."

His tone made my stomach twist. I tried to laugh it off nervously.

"I know you love me so much. I mean... you wouldn't do that to me, right?"

He stepped closer. "How would you get pregnant, then?"

I let out a small laugh. “You said I’m too young for that! And we’re not having any babies until Jiji and Ranaji do!”

He chuckled softly, then said in a deeper voice, “But I think I want one now... a baby girl.”

My eyes widened as I felt my back hit the couch. I saw him approach and place his arms on either side of me, caging me in.

My heart began racing, thumping wildly against my ribs.

“It’ll be just a bit... right?” The words escaped my mouth before I could stop them.

He didn’t move. He just stared sharply. His finger rose to touch my chin gently.

Then, in a low, dark voice, he whispered, “No. You’ll take all of it... until you can’t handle one more inch. Until you feel exhausted.”

My eyes widened, and before I could think, I pushed him away.



30 Ranvijay

I watched her eyes widen in a mix of horror and nervousness.

Before I could even blink, she pressed both her palms against my chest and pushed me hard.

"I'm feeling sleepy," she muttered, rushing past me.

I couldn't help but smile as I watched her scamper away like a flustered child, but just as she neared the bed, she banged her knee on the side table and instantly bent forward in pain.

"Ugh!!!" she let out a yelp, clutching her leg.

My chest clenched, and I ran to her in a panic. I held her by the arms, steadying her, and looked at her bent form.

"Can't you just walk properly, Aishwarya?" The words came out louder than I had intended, tinged with fear and anguish.

She looked up at me with teary eyes. Watching her lips wobble, my heart sank.

I exhaled immediately, lowering my voice. "Okay... okay... I'm sorry, baby. I'm so sorry."

A tear slipped down her cheek, and I gently guided her to sit on the couch.

"Sit here," I said softly, kneeling in front of her.

She sniffled as more tears followed, and I reached for the hem of her skirt to examine her injury.

The moment my hand moved to lift it, she flinched slightly in hesitation.

"I've seen enough, Aishwarya," I muttered with a smile, trying to ease her.

Her leg was trembling. I gently raised her skirt to her knee, and there I saw a fresh trail of blood streak down her soft, brown skin.

I inhaled sharply, glaring at her.

"What? I didn't do it deliberately," she muttered defensively, even when her lips still quivered from the pain.

"Of course you didn't," I murmured. "Now, stay here," I stood up to fetch stuff for dressing her wound.

I returned with a muslin cloth, a few cotton balls and the turmeric powder I always kept in the almirah for emergencies. Sitting back down, I gently wiped her cheeks.

"Sometimes, I want to scold you so badly that you burst into tears," I said with a sigh, more out of love than anger.

She pouted up at me and whimpered. "It's hurting."

"I know," I replied, collecting some turmeric powder on a cotton ball.

"It'll hurt more."

She gave me an angry little glare with her brows furrowed.

I knelt again, dabbing the turmeric as slowly and softly as I could. But the moment it touched her skin, she winced.

Holding her calf firmly, I blew on the wound to soothe it, and glanced up to see her watching like a curious child.

Sometimes she looked so adorable, like a baby, especially when those innocent eyes searched mine in wonder and in disbelief.

Another soft cry slipped past her lips as I gently rubbed the blood off.

"Calm down," I said, securing the cotton and reaching for the muslin cloth. She stayed quiet, all the while I wrapped it neatly around her knee, but I could feel her eyes on me the whole time.

Then, in the softest voice, she asked, "So... whatever you said before... it wasn't a joke? It's real?"

I smiled faintly, nodding as I continued wrapping the bandage.

"Everyone does that?" she asked again.

"Yes."

She inhaled a long breath, clearly processing the horror of this new reality.

"Jiji and Ranaji too?" Her voice was barely a whisper.

I looked at her and gave a slow nod.

“Oh my God,” she whispered, placing her hand over her stomach like something had just shifted inside her. “I’m suddenly feeling sick after listening to it,” she said, looking absolutely stunned, and I couldn’t help but chuckle. “I mean... why?” She frowned. “Why do you put it in to get a baby? Couldn’t there be an easier way, like... like something simpler?”

She cursed under her breath, and I tried to keep my gaze low to hide my smirk.

“How do you even know that? Have you done it before? Am I not your first wife?” she asked, furrowing her brows.

I tied the knot of her bandage and looked at her after pulling her skirt back down.

“No, I haven’t done it before. And yes, you are my first and last wife, and I’m telling you this for the very last time, Aishwarya. As for how I know... I just do. That’s all you need to know.”

My voice came out a little harsher than intended, but I couldn’t help it. Whenever she talked like this, something inside me grew edgy.

She blinked. “Are you hurt? I’m so sorry,” she mumbled, looking at me with concern.

I didn’t reply immediately. Instead, I straightened up and sat beside her, reaching out to take her hand.

But she hesitated and slowly pulled her hand back. “Umm... Ah... I’m feeling sleepy,” she mumbled.

I stared at her silently, watching her behave in an odd, nervous manner. She stood and limped carefully toward the bed, biting back small wincing as her leg trembled with each step.

I sighed and stood up, and without a word, I walked over and lifted her into my arms.

“Hukum!” Her eyes widened in surprise, and she struggled slightly in my grip.

"Don't worry, baby. We won't do anything until you're ready," I assured calmly.

She looked into my eyes without a word.

"Just be comfortable, like you know nothing. It's normal," I added, trying to reassure her.

"But it's not normal! How can it be? I mean... how can you even consider that normal? Are you joking? Tell me you're joking," she said, panicking again.

I exhaled deeply as I lay her down on the bed with care.

"Yes. I was joking," I said finally.

Her face lit up with relief.

"I knew it! I knew you were joking! I could sense it. That couldn't possibly be real; it doesn't even sound real. But you have such a dirty brain, Hukum! Such a dirty imagination!" She shook her head in disbelief.

"Babies are a blessing, they can't come from something so... disgusting! What if someone gets sick? What if bones break? What if someone dies?! How could you even think of something like that as a joke?!" She went on and on, blabbering nervously as I gently rested her leg beneath the comforter.

Once she was settled, I walked around to the other side of the bed and lay down too.

"You're joking, right?" she asked again, blinking her beautiful, wide eyes uncertainly, searching my face.

I turned slightly toward her, smiling softly. "What do you want to hear, Aishwarya?"

"Truth," she whispered.

I bit my lower lip for a second, then answered quietly. "I told the truth. That's how a baby happens. It's reality."

She immediately palmed her face and let out a deep, dramatic sigh.

"Ugh... everyone cheated me. No one told me that before the wedding. I would've died before marrying!"

I chuckled. "Don't be so dramatic, Aishwarya."

Her head shot toward me.

“I’m being dramatic? Me?! Hukum, everything was kept a secret from me, and now I can’t even say anything about it?!”

I couldn’t help but lift myself and lean over her, resting on my elbows beside her chest.

Her eyes widened again, and she immediately pressed her palms to my chest.

“Hukum!” She tried to push me back. “Okay, okay, I’m not saying anything else!” she stuttered nervously.

I stared down at her hands pressed against my chest.

“No, now I want to listen. What were you saying about my lying to you?” I asked teasingly.

“No... no, no... I just remembered that... Jiji had called me,” she said in a rush, trying to slip out from beneath me.

I smirked, watching her squirm like a little kitten caught in mischief.

“Bhabhi-sa called you in the middle of the night?” I asked, narrowing my eyes slightly. She pushed me away and swung her feet down onto the floor.

“Yes! I just remembered... Yes, she called me. And you know, while talking to you, I completely forgot,” she babbled, adjusting her dupatta after standing up.

I tilted my head slightly. “I thought you injured your knee?”

She looked down at her feet and shook her head quickly. “Nooo! I didn’t!”

I smiled, watching her slowly limp away.

Once she got closer to the door, I called out, “Aishwarya.”

She turned at once. “Ji?”

I rested my arm beneath my head and looked at her from where I lay. “Don’t you think your Jiji will be busy doing some romance with Bhai-sa this late at night? You might end up disturbing them both.”

She stared at me blankly for a few moments, then slowly shook her head. “No, I don’t think so. Jiji is sensible... why would she?”

I raised a brow. "Or maybe you know she's not so sensible." She inhaled deeply and walked back toward the bed. "Okay, come here. I won't trouble you," I said, patting the space beside me.

"Promise? You won't do that again? Ever?" she asked warily.

"Ever?" I echoed, lifting a brow.

She rolled her eyes and nodded. "Yes... ever, maybe."

I bit my lower lip, letting my eyes linger on the way her loose hair danced beside her face. "Okay. Come here now."

She looked hesitant but eventually sat beside me. I watched the curve of her back and the tied strings of her maroon blouse. Something about those delicate strings made my fingers itch. I exhaled and placed my hand gently on her back.

She shivered slightly and turned to look at me. "Hukum..." she whispered.

From behind her, just as I leaned in and placed a kiss on her nape, below her slightly dishevelled bun, her body froze.

She looked at me with her widened eyes. "What are you doing?" she urged in an unsteady voice.

I slid my hand to her back and gently tugged the string of her blouse.

"Asking you to let me suck your breast," I said softly.

She drew in a shaky breath and looked over her shoulder at me. "But you're not asking... you're already untying it."

I slowly trailed my fingers along her shoulder and pulled the sleeve down. Her warm, fragrant skin, lightly scented with her bathing oils, was already testing my restraint.

"And you're not stopping me," I murmured.

She lowered her gaze as the blouse slid off her shoulder.

"I can't call you by your name, Hukum," she breathed.

"You can... but you don't want to, Aishwarya."

Her breathing deepened as my lips found her neck again, kissing her skin slowly.

"Hukum..."

With my fingers, I gently pulled the sleeves further down, letting the fabric slip from her body.

"Ask me to stop if you want me to, baby."

She moved slightly and folded her arms over her chest. "Hukum..."

"Hmm?" I hummed, stroking her arm lightly.

"Will it hurt?" she asked faintly.

I wrapped one arm around her waist and pulled her between my legs. I could feel her heart pounding through her bare back pressed to my chest. As she leaned in to me after a moment, her skin felt warm and soft.

"Yes, it will," I answered quietly.

Pulling the comforter over us, I leaned back against the pillows. She covered herself up to her chest and tucked her knees close. I laced our fingers together over her stomach.

"A lot?" she asked.

I nodded faintly. "Depends."

"On what?"

I lifted my other hand and cupped her neck, turning her face slightly toward me.

I placed a kiss on her cheek. "On how rough it will be."

Her palm felt cold and clammy against mine as she whispered her next question.

"Will it... be rough?"



31 Aishwarya

My gaze lingered on his lips as I awaited his answer.

"I don't want to hurt you," he whispered, and I closed my eyes, feeling his mouth slowly move toward my ear. The way his cheek pressed against mine as he brushed aside the baby hairs tickling my face made my stomach twist in anticipation.

My lips parted instinctively as my face tilted toward his touch.

"So... that's why you get hard? It means you want to...?" I asked in a barely audible whisper.

His lips brushed my ear, and in a low, husky murmur, he replied, "Yes. First thing in the morning, last thing in the evening... and every time you call me Hukum and smile, I want to feel you around me, deep inside you, and make you insane."

A violent shiver ran down my spine at his words, and I struggled slightly in his firm embrace.

"But... it'll make us many babies, no? I mean, day and night and so much..." I asked, but words tumbled clumsily out of my mouth.

He bit the outer corner of my ear, making me hiss at the sting. I could feel the wet trail of his lips and tongue on my ear as I tried to pull away.

"It's not just for babies, Aishwarya," he said, and my heart pounded so loud I could hear it.

"Then... what else is it for?" I asked.

He suddenly pulled his knee up, brushing his toes with my foot under the comforter.

"Do you like it when I touch you... kiss you... suck you?" he asked, reaching for my wrist and sliding the bangles off slowly.

I hesitated, trying to pull my hand back. "You shouldn't take them off, Hukum. It's not a good omen to remove wedding bangles before forty-five days," I said softly, but he didn't stop.

"I asked you something." His warm voice stirred something strange and intense inside me.

"Yes..." I admitted breathlessly, unable to lie.

"That's what it's for, too. To make you feel good," he said, removing the bangles from my other wrist and placing them aside.

"How can something painful make you feel good?" I asked.

I felt his toe curl into my anklet, while one of his hands trailed up and cupped the side of my neck.

As his lips met the crook of my neck, I tilted my head back.

He began with a slow kiss and wrapped his mouth around my skin, sucking it gently, and then dug his teeth there, biting me. Goosebumps broke out across my body, and I felt a sudden wetness between my thighs.

I gasped at the sharp sting on my neck, and he pulled back slightly.

"It hurt you, didn't it?" he asked.

I nodded slowly. "Yes."

"But it's different from the first time, right? You like it now?" he asked again.

I nodded again. "Yes," I whispered.

He placed his lips on my shoulder before saying, "It'll only hurt in the beginning... then you'll get used to it."

"Used to it?" I asked, shivering from the words alone. "Why do we have to get used to it?"

He didn't answer in words; instead, his mouth latched onto my shoulder again, this time with a firmer bite.

I whimpered from the pain, but my body had already begun melting into the warmth of his mouth.

"You'll know, baby... you'll know," he whispered.

My eyes shut. It felt like I was losing my senses. I didn't know when his touch became something that awakened every nerve in me.

His lips left gentle kisses on my shoulder and neck while his hand slipped beneath the comforter. I arched my back slightly as his fingers found their way to my chest. My nipples were aching hard, and my body was trembling. His finger caressed the skin beside my nipple, circling slowly before softly pinching the sensitive bud between his fingers.

My head rolled back, and my mouth parted with a moan at the fresh surge of sensation.

I clenched my thighs together, feeling myself grow wet.

"Does this wetness mean I want that too?" I asked in a shaky voice, barely able to breathe.

He hummed low in my ear in response.

I stretched my knee straight with anticipation and felt an intense wave of pain shoot through my body, jolting my sanity back into place.

"Oh, my knee," I nearly cried out, and he instantly pulled his hand and lips away from me.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, Aishwarya," his voice whispered in my ear, and I shut my eyes tightly against the ache.

"Don't move," he said and rubbed my thigh in an effort to soothe the pain. "It's okay, calm down," his deep voice sent a wave of comfort to me, easing the tension in my body.

I focused on breathing steadily to calm myself.

It took a few moments, but the pain eventually subsided.

He brushed his lips over my forehead. "Is it better?" he asked softly, and I nodded.

"Yes, a little," I murmured, and he kept caressing my arms gently. I inhaled deeply and let myself sink into his warmth. We talked a little more, then settled under the comforters. And I didn't even know when sleep had claimed me.



I woke up to the cold emptiness beside me. My arms stretched out instinctively, searching for him. As consciousness returned, I pulled the comforter over my bare chest. The curtains around the bed were drawn shut, offering comfort and privacy.

No sound stirred in the chamber. I sat up slowly.

Grabbing my blouse from the corner of the bed, I slipped it on. The memories of the night before surfaced, making my mind hazy. His lips on my neck, my shoulder...

I shook my head, fumbling with the knot, which refused to tie properly. Still, it held just enough. Then, I spotted my bangles on the side table. Pushing the curtain aside, I leaned to grab them and slid them on, one by one.

I stood and heard the faint sound of utensils clinking in the bathroom.

He is still here.

I picked up my dupatta and wrapped it across my chest. My knee felt much better. Smiling to myself, I walked to the window and saw it was still early morning, then quietly ambled to the bathing room.

"Hukum," I called in a gentle voice, and saw him sitting on the edge of the pool, pouring water over himself from a pot.

I swallowed hard at the sight of his half-naked body.

Water trickled over his shoulders, down his chest, across his stomach. He looked up at me, and I froze in place, flickering my gaze from his eyes to his torso.

"Come, let's bathe together," he said.

A small smile tugged at my lips, but I shook my head. "No, I'm not falling for your sinful intentions," I replied softly.

He let out a short laugh. "Sinful intentions?" He raised a brow.

I bit my lip and nodded. "Yes. Now I know what you want to do with me. So I'm not giving in."

He stepped out of the water and walked toward me. My heartbeat quickened as I took a step back, but he was fast

enough to catch my wrist and pull me back, pressing me against the cold stone wall of the doorway.

My eyes widened in shock and nervousness. Feeling a flicker of fear stirring in me, I looked down, aware of him moving closer.

"Sinful intentions, huh?" he muttered against my face, and I felt his finger gently lifting my chin.

His eyes stayed on me, waiting for my response, and I nodded slowly.

"Yes."

He drew in his lower lip, moved his face so close I could feel the warmth of his breath.

"You don't even have the slightest idea what my intentions are for you in terms of sins, Aishwarya," he whispered, and a tremor ran down my spine. My lashes fluttered rapidly. "And I bet you don't want to know either," he added darkly.

"I want to have an idea, though," I whispered before I could stop myself.

A barely there smile played on his lips as he leaned closer to my ear. As my back pressed hard into the rocky wall, the cold roughness of it against my bare skin gave me chills.

He inhaled deeply, then murmured in my ear, "Like this... but with nothing between or around us. Your legs wrapped around my waist, your lips trembling, begging for every breath."

My stomach twisted, hearing his sinful desires, and I clenched my thighs together, overwhelmed by the sudden wetness he'd stirred inside me.

I didn't know why, but it scared me in a way that thrilled me.

I glanced at his damp shoulder and, unable to resist, placed my hand on it. The water on his skin was cool against my palm. I noticed the contrast in our skin tones. He was fairer, more defined... but still mine. His goodness, his flaws, everything was only mine. He was mine.

“And,” I added in a soft voice.

His arm curled around my waist, jerking me close. My dupatta turned damp from his body’s wetness, and my head tilted back when his hand ran along my spine, up to the nape of my neck.

“And on the carpet you bought,” he continued, “I want to make you cry my name under the moonlight in the courtyard’s quiet, with your body bare, laid out on that carpet, before my eyes.”

Goosebumps raced across my skin, and I trembled at the sheer intensity of his voice.

“But... it’ll hurt,” I whispered.

“So what? You cut my hand the other day, didn’t you? We still need to settle that,” he said, brushing his lips against my neck, biting slowly.

“I didn’t know you were talking about that kind of pain that day,” I gasped and tried to push him away.

“Let me do just this one, baby,” he murmured, then suddenly took both of my wrists in his hand and twisted them behind me.

A jolt of pain and fear rushed through my body, igniting strange sensations I couldn’t describe.

“You’ll be late for the court, Hukum,” I managed to say, trying to bring him back to reality.

But he sucked hard at my neck before answering, “No court for two months. I have to go somewhere.”

The moment the words left his lips, my eyes flew open, and I pushed him away.

“Wh... what?” I asked, stepping away.

Silence settled for a moment.

He ran his fingers through his hair and exhaled deeply. “Yes, Aishwarya. I have a few meetings to attend in different kingdoms,” he said.

“When?” I demanded.

He lifted an eyebrow, reminding me wordlessly of my tone.

“When?” I asked again, in a much softer tone this time.

He stepped closer and spoke in a low voice. “Today.”

And I didn’t know what overtook me, I pushed him away and stormed past him back into the chamber, with the sudden anger surging within me.

Blood rushed to my cheeks, and my heart raced wildly with a flood of emotions. I was angry, sad... and most of all, I was deeply affected by him.

In my whole life, I had never felt this way, since I had never been so close to anyone.

“Aishwarya,” he called from the dressing room, but I inhaled sharply, trying to ignore him. I tried to steady my breath, but then he called again.

“Aishwarya, I need your help.”

I closed my eyes tightly, trying to calm my racing heart, and, frustrated, turned back to walk into the dressing room.

He was standing near the mirror, tying the knot of his white kurta. Water droplets trailed down his wet hair and across his chest, and I swallowed nervously.

“Aishwarya,” he said again.

I bit my lower lip and slowly closed the door behind me. “You cannot go,” I said in a low and shaky voice, walking toward him.

He turned to look at me with a hint of a smile on his lips. “What? What did you say?” Though his tone was soft, I felt a sudden shift in me. Looking up at him, I felt a churning sensation in my stomach.

“I said you cannot go.”

He lowered his gaze to his chest to tie the knots and turned back to the mirror.

“It’s important, baby,” he said quietly.

I stepped closer, standing beside him, and looked at the side view of his face.

“Why? What’s the matter? Can’t someone else go in your place?”

He met my eyes for a moment before answering.

“Bhai-sa doesn’t trust anyone else in these matters, Aishwarya. It’s important. And I’ll be back in just two months. Just two months.” He spoke, and I felt a tightness take over my chest.

“Two months? Just two months? Just two months,” my voice faltered as I repeated his words on the verge of tears.

“Yes, just two months. And in that time, you can focus on your business and your lessons. I won’t be around to disturb you, distract you... or devour you,” he added with a small laugh by the end.

I breathed in slowly.

“Yes, you won’t be around to motivate me, hold me, talk to me, sleep beside me, eat with me, laugh with me... or do anything with me. And I’ll be alone again. Like I always have been. No one around will be there except the attendants asking, ‘Princess breakfast? Princess lunch? Princess, this, that...’. And you call it two months.”

I paused as my voice tightened.

“Maybe it’s easy for you because you’re used to this. Being alone and going away. It might be normal for you, Hukum. But I don’t want to go back to my old normal. I don’t want to look at these walls that remind me of Songarh. I don’t want to wake up to just the sky, these trees, these gardens, that feel the same.”

“How did it look in Songarh?” he interrupted.

I inhaled deeply, feeling my heart breaking at the thought of being alone again within the silent walls of the chamber and empty surroundings.

“Hopeless.”

He looked at me, blinking silently, then stepped closer to hold my hands.

“Do you trust me, Aishwarya?” he asked, and I tried to pull my hands away.

“What kind of question is that? I want you to say you’re not going. Or at least... at least take me with you.” My voice was laced with a hint of anger and frustration.

“Answer what I asked, Aishwarya.”

I sighed deeply.

“Yes, I trust you. But no... I don't trust you about the thing you told me yesterday.”

He gave a faint smile and stayed quiet for a moment before speaking again.

“You need these two months to understand where your true hope lies, Aishwarya.”

I pulled my hands back immediately.

“I know where my hope lies. And I'm asking him not to leave me behind. Because I'm scared. And I'm tired. I'm... tired of being alone, Hukum. For God's sake.”

My voice broke by the end, overwhelmed by the emotions. As tears slid down my cheeks, his expression shifted at once, and he pulled me into a warm embrace.

“Oh, my baby. Stop, stop, stop crying, please.” He exhaled deeply, holding me tighter, patting my back slowly. “I'm sorry. So sorry, Aishwarya.”

I closed my eyes, letting the scent of his bathing oils and his warmth wrap around me like a blanket.

“Don't go, Hukum. Please,” I whispered.

He kept patting my back gently and spoke again in a low, soothing voice.

“I wouldn't go if I were just your husband, Aishwarya. But I have responsibilities to this kingdom, too. And those responsibilities include helping thousands of people who are struggling with poverty, who are seeking education. And I know you're a really, really good and loving person. Surely, you wouldn't be selfish enough to think only of yourself, to keep your husband with you when you know so many others need his help. I know my wife is brave and intelligent enough to wait for just two months, so her husband can go and bring something better for the people. Right, baby? You're not selfish... are you?”

I stood silently, listening to him, trying to breathe evenly and understand what he was saying. And slowly... the fear

of being left alone in my mind began to settle.

Yes, the people need him.

I pulled away from his embrace, and he cupped my face, wiping my tears with his thumbs. As his eyes searched mine, I gave a small nod.

"Yes, I'm not selfish... but two months is too much, don't you think?"

He smiled and shook his head. "No. You won't even miss me."

"That's not true. I already miss you," I said, and he chuckled softly.

"I don't want you to miss—"

"Yes, yes, yes, I know," I cut him off before he could finish. "I have to concentrate on business and learning during these two months. I understand. But still... I don't want you to go." I looked down, pursing my lips.

He made me look into his eyes again.

"I wouldn't go... but then I have needs of my own. So, if you promise to let me do that every day for two months, I won't g—"

"Okay, you go," I cut him off sharply, taking a step back. "I'll be happy without you. And I should focus on my work and other things. I mean, it's just two months, right? So yes, you should go. People need you. There's a better use for you than being with me. You must be getting late. I should check on your breakfast."

I turned to leave, but he caught my wrist and pulled me back.

"My outfit broke. I want you to fix it for me."

I looked down at the torn collar of his kurta and nodded.

"Oh... let me get my kit."

I walked to the trunk and pulled out my needle and a spool of white thread, returning to where he stood. But as I reached for his collar, I found it difficult to stitch properly because of his height.

"Do you mind sitting?"

He chuckled and sat on the chair in front of the mirror. I leaned forward slightly to begin, but then he suddenly wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me into his lap.

My eyes widened, and I tried to stand again, but his grip tightened, leaving me no choice but to settle into his lap.

"I'll miss you too, Aishwarya," he whispered as I focused on pushing the needle through the fabric.

"A lie."

"You know I don't lie."

Still fixing my gaze on the torn edge of the collar, I murmured, "You know... suddenly, I've realised how little I know about you. And now I understand those smirks... those stares. Maybe everything between us isn't about us at all. Maybe it's just because I'm your wife, and you're supposed to... want something from me. And that's why you behave this way."

I didn't know where the words came from, maybe deep within my fears. He behaved well, perhaps because... he wanted that from me.

He inhaled deeply, and silence lingered before he spoke.

"That's not true, Aishwarya. I don't know what else you expected me to be like. Is the image of men so distorted that even our sincerity is measured against whether we want something from you? If that's what you really think, then fine, we'll never do like that. I promise I won't touch you. But please... please be comfortable, my love." There was something wounded in his voice, and a soft smile formed on my lips.

I timidly raised my face to look at him. His eyes were serious and slightly hurt.

"I didn't mean it like that, Hukum," I whispered.

He exhaled and leaned forward, pressing a kiss on my forehead. And I closed my eyes.

In that moment, wrapped in his arms, I felt a warmth so intense that it made my heart swell with his love.

“Then don’t talk like this. You are my intelligent and beautiful wife. I don’t want you to judge me for intentions that are hardly taking birth yet,” he said, and I smiled a little.

“But they are taking birth, right?” I asked, leaning closer to cut the thread and placing the needle carefully on the table beside me.

“Ab ek hi to patni hai humaari. Jo kahin na phisla, wo kahin to phislega, Aishwarya.” (Oh, come on, Aishwarya, I’ve got just one wife. Even the one that had never strayed is bound to slip somewhere when it comes to love.) he said with a casual grin, and my cheeks warmed instantly, forcing me to drop my gaze shyly.

“But still... I don’t trust you. I’ll ask Jiji about it and prove you wrong soon,” I said with firm confidence, and he just smiled at me.

“All the best, my love.” His words ‘my love’ made my heart flutter. It burned softly on my cheeks, and I looked away, trying to hide the smile forming on my lips.

Suddenly, he cupped my right cheek, brushing his thumb lightly across my skin as he guided my face closer to his.

“So, now... if you don’t mind, can we kiss?” he asked gently.

But before I could answer, his warm lips were already on mine, sucking them softly but firmly, drawing me in, leaving me breathless.

My eyelashes fluttered shut, and I instinctively arched my back to create space, but his other hand caught my waist, pulling me closer. This time, his touch wasn’t over my dupatta; it slipped beneath, caressing my bare skin.

I inhaled sharply as my breath grew heavier. But it seemed as though he had no intention of letting go.

His lips parted, and I felt the gentle graze of his tongue entering my mouth. In a single moment, my knees weakened, and it felt as though I had lost control of myself.

I tried to pull away, but he moved his hand behind my neck, entangling his fingers in my messy bun. And before I could comprehend it, I felt the pin loosen and fall, and my hair cascaded down freely over my back.

“Hukum,” I breathed into his mouth when his fist gently gripped the hair at the base of my neck, and a soft, aching cry escaped my lips.

My eyebrows drew together as I looked into his eyes. I pressed my palms against his chest and pushed back firmly, standing up from his lap.

“The remaining... will be after two months,” I said, panting unevenly.

But before I could fully step away, he caught my wrist and pulled me back a little.

“Remaining means all? Like... everything?” he asked with a teasing smile, and I shook my head quickly.

“Kiss. The remaining kiss.” I repeated, pulling my hand out of his grip and taking a few steps away from him.

“Aishwarya,” he called, and I turned to look at him, shaking my head.

“No, I am not falling into this trap again,” I said, and walked away into the bathroom.

After taking my bath and getting ready in silence, I came out of the dressing room only to find him nowhere around.

Maybe he went to talk to Ranaji.

I knew he had work and that he couldn’t be with me all the time, but what could I have possibly done with my poor heart if it missed him so much?

How could I have spent even two months without hearing his voice, without looking at him, knowing he wouldn’t be around?

It was already breaking my heart.

“Princess Aishwarya,”

Suddenly, Moni’s voice caught my attention, and I turned to look in her direction.

“Ji,” I came out of my thoughts instantly and noticed an old lady standing beside her.

“Who is this?” I asked politely, and Moni smiled.

“Hukum appointed her as your master,” she said, and I frowned.

“Master to teach me how to read and write?” I asked, and she nodded.

“Ji.”

I smiled at the old lady and joined my hands to greet her. I didn’t know why, but whenever someone brought up the fact that I was illiterate, it made me feel strange and uncomfortable.

But now... I wasn’t uncomfortable anymore.

I mean, Hukum didn’t know how to stitch or do little things like that either, yet he never looked uncomfortable not knowing them.

“I will be delighted to teach you, Princess,” the old lady said.

I shook my head gently. “The pleasure is all mine. If you don’t mind, can we begin tomorrow? Because my Hukum-sa is leaving today, and I have to bid him goodbye.”

She nodded with a warm smile. “Of course, of course.”

I looked at Moni, gesturing for her to accompany the lady.

I inhaled deeply and looked out the window.

It was already late morning. He would probably leave after breakfast.

Suddenly, the thought of cooking him his favourite dish crossed my mind, and I immediately rushed toward the kitchen.

I asked the attendants to help me prepare ***Daal-Baati-Choorma***. I didn’t know why, but I was feeling restless. As the sun rose higher, the ache in my chest deepened.

“Can you bring the breakfast to our chamber?” I asked an attendant after we finished cooking.

I then returned to our chamber, and there my eyes fell on him as he gave instructions to attendants who were packing

his stuff. There were nearly ten of them surrounding him, filling trunks.

It broke my heart for real.

Suddenly, he lifted his gaze and looked at me standing at the doorway.

There was silence as neither of us said anything.

“Princess, breakfast,” One of the attendants broke the silence, and I stepped aside to let them in and place the food on the table.

He looked at the food, then back at me. I watched the attendants serve it from the large bowls onto the plates.

“Leave it,” I said, and they nodded. I inhaled deeply before saying, **“Ekaant.”** (Privacy.)

Hukum looked at me in silence as the others left. I lowered my gaze and stepped toward the couch.

“Bhojan to karke jaayenge na aap?” (You will at least have breakfast, right?) I asked and noticed his slow footsteps approaching.

“Aapne banaya hai to awashya karenge.” (If you have cooked, then of course I will.) he said, and I nodded.

“Yes, I cooked.”

I sat on the couch and served him.

He sat beside me and said, **“Bhaag kar to aap aise gayin thi jaise lautkar hi nahi aayengi.”** (You ran away as if you wouldn’t return.)

I heard the teasing smirk in his voice and looked at him. “Just for this once,” I replied, and he shifted closer.

“Aaj aapke haath se bhojan karne ki iccha hai, Aishwarya.” (Today, I wish to eat from your hands, Aishwarya.) he said, and I timidly lowered my eyes to tear a bite.

Nervously, I offered it to him.

He lowered his face and opened his mouth to take it in. His lips accidentally brushed my fingers, and a slight shiver ran down my spine.

I glanced down at the plate, trying to focus on feeding him again.

"I will be back soon, and by then I at least want you to have your first order. I will be immensely delighted," he said, taking another bite, and I nodded.

"I know."

"And don't miss me much," he said. "Because I'm just a letter away."

I lifted my gaze.

"You know I don't know how to write," I said, and he smiled, taking another bite.

"And you are just a few lessons away from that,"

I chuckled before saying, "I met the master you've appointed for me."

He smiled.

"I feel you are a little distracted when I teach you. With her, I'm sure, you'll pay better attention," he spoke, and I pouted, still looking at him.

"You like deciding for me, just like my father and sisters," I said.

His smile vanished instantly, and his brows drew together. "No, baby, I'm just trying to help," he said gently.

I smiled. "I know, Hukum," I replied.

Suddenly, he placed a finger under my chin and lifted my face to meet his eyes. "Aishwarya, call me Ranvijay," he said, out of nowhere, and I chuckled.

"No, I can't."

I said and turned my gaze back to the food.

"Once, please," he said again, gently turning my face back to him.

I narrowed my eyes slightly. "Why do you want me to say your name?" I asked, noticing the sudden seriousness that clouded his expression.

"I don't know," he admitted. "It would make me feel closer to you. When I say 'Aishwarya', I feel a sense of right over

you. In the same way, I want to feel that you hold some authority over me too.”

I chuckled, shaking my head. “I don’t have any authority over you, Hukum,” I said, and just as I extended my hand to feed him another bite, he caught my wrist to stop me.

“Then take some,” he murmured. “Make me feel like I belong to you.”

My smile faded, and I lowered my gaze. “You can ask me for anything, Hukum,” I whispered, “but don’t ask me to cross that line. I don’t avoid saying your name because of tradition. I do it because it’s my love for you... my devotion... and, above all, my respect.”

He shifted closer and guided my face so that it met his gaze. Staring into my eyes for a few moments, his lips formed a faint smile.

“I will make you cross that line too,” he said quietly, but the tinge of mischief in his tone didn’t go unnoticed by me. “And when I do, it’ll be a moment you’ll never forget.”

A slow shiver ran down my spine because this time, I understood exactly what he meant. I blinked, unsure of how to react, and looked away, shaking my head.

“I won’t,” I said with a breath.

He leaned closer to my ear and whispered, “I just need one night to prove you wrong, baby.”

Startled, I quickly pushed him away and looked at him with widened eyes.

“I think you’re getting late,” I muttered, standing abruptly from the couch.

“But... breakfast,” he teased.

I narrowed my eyes. “Let your hosts finish the rest, HUKUM,” I said, raising my voice slightly on the last word.

He grinned. “Ranvijay, baby. Ranvijay,” he corrected with a chuckle.

I rolled my eyes as he rose to his feet.

“Okay, come. Let’s hug. Everyone must be waiting for me outside,” he said and stepped closer, pulling me into his

warm embrace.

My lashes fluttered closed in his hold, and my face rested against his chest.

"I love you, Aishwarya," he whispered, pressing a kiss into my hair. "I'll be back soon."

I wrapped my arms around him, nodding silently. "Ji."

He slowly let go and cupped my cheek, making me look up into his eyes.

"Show me how you laugh," he said, and I swallowed hard, trying to force a smile across my lips.

"Wider and louder, like hahaha," he showed with a playful laugh, and I let out a chuckle.

"No, louder! Open your mouth wide and go HAAAHAAAHA,"

He insisted, and this time I burst into laughter.

I laughed freely, and he kissed my forehead.

"I want my wife to laugh like this every day until I return," he whispered, and I smiled softly.

"Of course, and I want my husband to return as healthy as I'm sending him," I replied, and he chuckled warmly.

"I take better care of myself than you do," he teased, and I rolled my eyes.

"You forget your meals when you're working," I reminded him, and he gave a knowing smile.

"On a serious note, Aishwarya... please take care of yourself. And I truly am sorry I have to leave you like this," he said.

I shook my head. "I understand... It's your duty."

I adjusted my dupatta lower over my forehead as he reached out to hold my hand, and we began walking toward the exit.

The attendants moved ahead to carry his belongings, and we stepped out of the chamber to find Ranaji, Jiji, and several officials waiting at the entrance. As we neared the door, I slipped my hand free from his.

Jiji approached me and asked, "How are you?"

I smiled faintly and nodded. "I'm good."

She held my hand, sensing what I couldn't say.

"It's alright... just a few days," she said in a soft, comforting voice.

I nodded again. "Ji."

My eyes drifted to him speaking with Ranaji and the others, and I felt an ache blooming in my chest. My vision blurred slightly with tears I fought hard to contain. It was inauspicious to cry when someone left for work.

Suddenly, he turned and met my gaze. My heart skipped as he walked straight toward me, and Jiji stepped aside quietly.

He gently placed himself between me and the crowd, cradling my cheeks tenderly. The rhythm of my heart faltered when I remembered the first time he'd kissed me before everyone. As he leaned in again, I instinctively fisted the fabric of my skirt.

But this time, his lips pressed softly against my forehead.

"Take care, Aishwarya," he murmured, and I opened my eyes and nodded.

"You too, Hukum," I replied quietly, lowering myself to touch his feet, but he stopped me midway, shaking his head.

Without another word, he turned and walked toward his waiting horse.

I watched as he climbed up, smiled at me, and then rode away, slowly disappearing into the distance.

In those few moments, my world felt hollow again.

"Aishwarya." The sound of Jiji's voice broke through the silence, and I turned to her.

"Come, let's go inside," she said, and I nodded.

"Ji."

Inside my chamber, she sat beside me on the couch. I was holding back tears, but she wrapped me in a warm embrace and gently stroked my back.

“He’ll be back soon, Aishwarya,” she whispered. Tears finally spilt down my cheeks, and I nodded.

“Ji.”

“Princess Aishwarya,”

Ranaji’s voice called suddenly, and I quickly stood, pulling my veil down. I remained silent as he approached and rested a comforting hand on my head.

“You’re not alone here, Princess. We are your family, too. Spend time with Nandani, and Ranvijay mentioned you’re planning to start a business. You have our full support. Whatever you need, be it a finance manager, labourers, anything, just ask, and it will be arranged,” he said, and I glanced at the group of people standing behind him.

I nodded quietly, and he added, “And don’t worry, Nandani can stay with you.”

A soft chuckle escaped my lips, and I looked at Jiji, who was staring at him, astounded.

Once Ranaji left, I pulled up my veil, and Jiji sat on the couch with a slightly sombre face.

I sat beside her and softly said, “It’s okay, Jiji. You don’t have to stay with me all the time.”

She gave me a faint smile. “No, it’s alright. Rudra is quite busy these days. He’s expecting guests and has many meetings lined up. And since both his brothers are away, he has to manage everything on his own. So technically we both need to be here for each other,” she said, and I returned her smile.

“Jiji,” I called gently, and she looked up at me with a lazy expression.

“Hmm?”

Suddenly her eyes widened, and she squealed, “Yes, yes, yes! You’re designing clothes! Show me, Aishwarya. I’m excited!”

Her words pulled me out of my thoughts.

“Ah... yes,” I said, a little distracted, rising from the couch. “I’ll bring them.”

“No, wait. I’ll wait in your courtyard. Need a bit of fresh air,” she said, also getting up. I smiled and headed into my dressing room to fetch the trunk where I had kept all the designs I had created over the years.

When I reached the courtyard, I saw her sitting on the carpet with a small group of women. Moni spotted me and hurried forward.

“Let me carry it,” she said, taking the trunk from my hands and placing it in front of Jiji.

I sat down across from her as I opened it. Her face lit up the moment her eyes fell on my work.

One by one, she examined the pieces, and her expressions ranged from awe to sheer delight.

“Oh my goodness, Aishwarya! You are immensely talented. I can’t believe what I’m seeing,” she exclaimed, and I giggled softly.

Even the other women around us looked amazed. I had never imagined that people would admire my work so genuinely. My sisters had seen them before, but they were always more interested in borrowing than praising.

Jiji then introduced me to a group of women. One would help recruit workers, another manage finances, and a third coordinate with agents who would distribute the garments to markets across other kingdoms.

“We’ll operate like this,” Jiji said, gesturing to the team.

I shook my head gently. “We can’t work that way,” I interrupted, and she looked at me, surprised.

“What? Why not? Most businesses work exactly like this,” she replied.

“I understand, but I believe we should build separate distribution chains depending on our customers,” I began. “For villagers and commoners, the market setup is perfect, since it is affordable and manageable. But to target women from other royal families, who bring in high revenue, we need a more refined approach.”

I saw their brows furrow as I continued.

“Men have regular gatherings, political meetings and kingdom affairs. Why can’t women have something similar? A gathering... a get-together where we showcase our clothes by wearing them ourselves. That way, they can see the fabric, the designs, the craftsmanship, without feeling like they’re being sold to. It’s like quietly serving them without letting them realise it. It’ll spark their curiosity, and they’ll want to know more. If we approach them directly for sales, they might dismiss us. Power and pride play a role. But if we engage them through friendship, it’ll create intrigue and loyalty.”

A pause lingered in the air.

“Pardon me, Princess,” one of the agents said politely, breaking the silence.

“Yes?”

“Don’t you think this will increase the costs of arranging feasts, hosting gatherings, and then trying to sell?”

I cleared my throat and nodded. “Yes, ini—”

“Yes, initially,” Jiji interrupted, “but it will build lasting connections between empires. Like ours, their queens and noblewomen also guide other kingdoms. Strong bonds between women could reduce conflict, foster development, and lead to better collaboration.”

I smiled at her in gratitude and added, “Exactly. It will cost more initially, but the long-term benefits will be worth it. If we approach them directly, they might not support us, and things could go off balance. A get-together, where we’ll engage with these women emotionally, will help align our strategy with an emotional approach.”

For a few moments, everyone was silent. Then slowly, heads began to nod in agreement.

“Alright, that’s a plan for later,” Jiji said, looking at me. “But where do we start now?”

I paused for a moment and replied, “We’ll begin with our first collection. This week, let’s launch them in the general market and observe how people respond.”

I wasn't sure if I sounded confident enough, but Jiji smiled. "Alright. Then let's begin with that," she said.

"We'll begin tomorrow," I said. "Today, I need some time to brainstorm a few more ideas," and they all turned to look at me, nodding in support.

We continued our discussion for a while, going over everything I had envisioned for the designs just as I had shared with Hukum.

To my surprise, everyone seemed amazed and genuinely excited.

And somewhere deep within, I felt excited too.

The meeting wrapped up in the afternoon, and both Jiji and I were starving by the time it ended. I insisted she return to her chamber to rest, but she chose to stay and have lunch with me.

The attendants brought our meal to the courtyard and set the plates between us. We had barely waited before beginning to eat.

"Jiji," I called softly, and she looked up at me.

"Yes?" she answered, still chewing. I could tell she was hungry.

"Do you mind if I ask you something?" I hesitated.

"What's it? And why would I mind? You're my little sister. You can ask me anything or ask me to do anything for you," she said warmly, and I smiled.

"Umm... I don't know how to say this, but..."

"What's 'but'?" she teased, and I inhaled deeply as she looked at me with a curious smile.

"Tell me," she insisted again, and I nervously blinked.

"Umm... Hukum... I mean, recently... he told me something strange. Something I can't quite believe is real," I said, and her brows knit with concern.

"Is everything okay?"

"Yes, yes... everything is okay," I rushed to say, then paused briefly.

“Actually... not everything is very okay. He told me something, and I think... maybe he was joking.”

Her curiosity grew as she narrowed her eyes. “What is it?”

I stirred my spoon in the bowl, struggling to find the words.

“He told me something... strange. About how babies are made,” I explained slowly.

Her eyes widened instantly, and she began coughing.

“Jiji, Jiji!” I panicked and quickly passed her a glass of water. “Are you alright?” I asked, watching as she tried to calm herself.

“Oh...” She exhaled a few deep breaths and finally looked at me again. Then asked quietly, “Aishwarya... don’t tell me you didn’t know how babies are made?” Her tone made me feel even more awkward.

Heat rushed to my cheeks as I shook my head. “I didn’t know... but Hukum told me last night. I think he was joking,” I revealed.

She shifted closer. “What exactly did he say?” she asked.

I swallowed nervously and tried to speak, “He said that... that big thing... goes in... there... to send seeds... directly.” My voice shook with embarrassment.

She pressed her lips together, trying not to smile, and gave a slight nod.

And the moment she did... the world slipped from beneath my feet. A shiver ran down my spine.

“So it’s real?” I asked, needing confirmation.

“Yes, it’s real.”

My fingers trembled at the thought of it.

“So that means... whenever we want a baby, he’ll... he’ll have to do that to me? And without it, we can’t have one?”

She nodded again.

“And why just for a baby, Aishwarya? It’s done for enjoyment and pleasure too.”

I frowned, trying to make sense of what I had just heard.

“What kind of pleasure can someone get from this? I mean... it’s big! And look at me, Jiji. How is that even possible? He even said it would hurt.”

“You’ll end up loving that pain, Aishwarya,” she said, holding my hand. “It’ll be the sweetest kind of pain you’ll ever feel. And don’t overthink it. These things happen naturally. You don’t need to worry. You can do it... whenever you feel like doing it.”

I inhaled deeply. “I don’t think I’ll ever feel like doing it, Jiji,” I murmured.

“You know, when I first learned about it, I had a similar reaction,” she said with a knowing smile. “I mean, yes, it sounds strange and unbelievable at first. But if you’ve ever paid attention to the world around you, it’s in our very nature. Dogs, cats, rabbits, horses, animals don’t need anyone to explain it to them. They just follow the heat of their bodies. It happens instinctively. So, when you feel the urge, the longing to have your husband close, loving you, and when you want him inside you, it’ll happen naturally.”

Her words stunned me a little. I looked at her, surprised. I had never seen an animal do that.

“So... how did you do it with Ranaji, Jiji? I mean... do you two really do that?” I asked cautiously, unsure if it was appropriate.

“Yes,” she replied with a wide smile.

“Ranaji and I have always had a pull between us. From the moment I first saw him in our palace, I knew this was the man I would give myself to. I knew this would happen someday, and I wanted it to happen with him.”

I frowned slightly, processing her words.

“So... it happened before marriage? And you didn’t get pregnant?” I asked in a low voice.

She chuckled softly. “Oh, I gave him every opportunity,” she said with a playful glint in her eyes, “But he was practising celibacy back then. And honestly, the

circumstances weren't right either. So, nothing really happened."

I furrowed my brows. "What do you mean? I mean, only if you're comfortable sharing." I asked.

She took a slow breath, and then she began.

She told me everything, from the moment they first met at her palace to how they gradually fell in love. There was also a political layer between them, which I hadn't known before. But what shocked me the most... was something I hadn't expected at all.

She told me about how Ranaji had once wronged her, something that sent a jolt through my entire being. How could Ranaji have done that to Jiji?

And then she explained how, despite everything, she had arranged for wedding invitations to be sent to Suryagarh's former king, the same man who was now imprisoned in Suryagarh.

Her voice changed when she told me how Ranaji had single-handedly claimed this kingdom, how he rode into their wedding covered in blood. Her face lit up with pride and reverence as she spoke of him.

Goosebumps rose on my skin just imagining it.

He had loved her so much.

She continued, telling me how misunderstandings and anger created distance between them at first, but there was always a soft corner in Ranaji's heart for her.

I listened quietly, soaking in her story. And when she reached the part where things between them had turned more intense, more passionate, my breath caught in my throat.

Goosebumps spread across my arms again, and my cheeks flushed hot with shyness.

I could hardly believe it.

"He did that?" I asked, shocked, and Jiji nodded with a smile.

“Not just that... a lot of things,” she said, and my eyes grew wider with each extra detail. I couldn’t believe she allowed him to do such things.

“It wasn’t uncomfortable?” I asked hesitantly.

She shook her head. “No. I mean, if it feels uncomfortable to do something with the man who is your lover, your husband, your everything, then with whom would it ever feel right?”

I took a deep breath. “But still... I don’t understand the real purpose of doing all that. Can’t love happen without it?”

She smiled gently. “Of course it can, Aishwarya. Everyone’s relationship is unique. It’s a personal choice how far you want to go, how much you want to give or receive. And you should never, ever let your partner force you into something you’re not ready for. I’m sure if you told Devar-sa not to do something, he would listen.”

I inhaled deeply. “But... what if he wants to?”

She raised her brows slightly. “Did he say that to you?”

I shook my head. “Not directly, but... I can sense it.”

“How?” she asked.

I hesitated, yet somehow let out the words. “I mean... he kisses my neck, and... he also... you know, sucked me down there... a few times.” My voice came out barely above a whisper.

She bit her lower lip and nodded slowly. “I think he’s just trying to make you feel safe with him. Has he ever forced anything?”

I shook my head at once. “No. Never.”

She smiled. “Then you don’t have to worry. But, Aishwarya, I want to ask you something.”

“Ji,” I replied softly.

She looked into my eyes and asked carefully, “There’s a difference between not wanting to do it... and not liking it. Which one is it for you?”

I frowned. “Aren’t they the same?”

She shook her head. "No. They're completely different. Not wanting means you're not ready. It could be because you're nervous, unsure, or still emotionally preparing yourself. But not liking means you don't enjoy his touch, his kisses, or anything that leads to intimacy," she explained.

I swallowed and let my thoughts drift inward, trying to make sense of it. "How would I know which one it is?"

She took a breath. "Do you like him being close to you?"

I nodded. "Yes. I want him close to me all the time."

"Do you enjoy his touch? Like when he holds your hand, kisses you, touches you on different parts of your body... even when he sucks you down there?"

I blinked nervously but answered in a low voice, "I can't deny that I like it. I mean... yes, I enjoy him holding my hand, kissing my lips, my cheeks, my neck. I even like his touch elsewhere... it makes me feel nervous, excited... thrilled."

She smiled warmly. "That's good. That means you like it... But you're just not ready yet."

I frowned again. "Jiji... how will I know I'm ready?"

She smiled, placing her hand on mine. "Your body will tell you."

But I didn't quite understand. "So... how did you know you wanted it?"

She breathed in deeply before answering. "Well... when you're with the right person... and his thoughts cloud your mind... when you feel that your life is incomplete without him... when you know that after him, there could be no one else... that's how you know."

I bit my lower lip, wondering silently. "How do you know if he's the right person for you?"

She lowered her gaze for a moment, then looked back at me. "You feel it in your gut," she began. "But also... just imagine the two of you when you're old. When you can't walk properly anymore, or sleep peacefully. Picture him beside you, still talking to you. It's important to share those

thoughts. If you can't even imagine that stage of life with him or if he can't discuss that with you, then maybe it isn't right." Once she was done, I nodded slowly.

And to my surprise... Hukum had never spoken about anything like that. Not once.

But why?

"Rani-sa," the sudden voice of an attendant interrupted my thoughts, and Jiji turned toward her.

"Ji?" she asked.

"Ranaji is asking for you."

Jiji looked back at me. "I'll be back soon, Aishwarya."

I shook my head with a smile. "It's okay. Let's meet tomorrow instead."

She smiled warmly and said, "Good night."

"Good night," I said, watching her walk away.

We hadn't realised how late the evening had become during our conversation. However, I felt an odd sense of contentment and fullness in my heart after speaking with her.

In my entire life, no one had spoken to me like this.

Not even Hukum. Not yet.

I felt so incredibly light... and happy.

Even so, the fact that Hukum and I would do that someday made my stomach twist and my brain feel like it was oozing.

The mere imagination of him being naked in front of me, and I, in front of him, of him coming closer, and pushing it in... it made me feel both sick and breathlessly thrilled.

I asked Moni to sleep with me that night. I was missing him.

The day ended on a good note, and the next day we began with the preparations for the designs, and I started my classes too. My master turned out to be a kind and patient woman, willing to give me extra time. She had already begun teaching me how to write letters and words. Reading sentences had also begun.

I didn't miss him as much during the day, but at night, his thoughts filled my mind like a storm cloud.

But everyone was there to help me, to talk to me, and to keep me from spiralling, especially Jiji, Moni, my master, and our team.

The first three weeks flew by as we finalised the designs. We hired workers to start designing the way as mine. I began with fifteen original designs and asked them to make as many copies as they could, in different colours and slight variations. I had also started reading a bit more.

Suddenly, my life felt blissful and full of purpose. My voice mattered as people listened to me. And suddenly, I felt like I existed.

And I was dying to tell Hukum everything. Everything.

When the production ended and we moved on to the launch phase, I missed him even more then. I wanted him by my side to see my progress, to support me, to hold me if anything went wrong.

Devar-sa had arrived late one night and offered to oversee everything personally. That eased some of my burden.

Everyone was full of praise and encouragement.

And finally, the day arrived when we launched the first hundred and fifty designs into the local market. The shopkeepers took only a few pieces, since they seemed hesitant to introduce something new.

I prayed to God for it all to go well.

Only two weeks remained until Hukum's return, and I was feeling inexplicably happy, light, and content.

My days were packed with meetings, discussions, and planning. My classes were going well, and I had begun reading short sentences, but the long words and lengthier sentences still intimidated me.

Another week passed.

We heard that the first fifty pieces had been sold. I wasn't overly impressed, but Jiji reminded me that people need time to adjust to new tastes and styles.

We had already begun preparations for the women's get-together I had envisioned. For that, I decided to create five extravagant designs, each inspired by myths and cultural symbols of different kingdoms, highlighting what they considered auspicious.

That way, five more days passed.

And with only two or three days left until Hukum's return, I decided to clean the chamber myself. I was bursting with excitement, counting down the moment I'd see him again. I just wanted to hold him tightly and tell him how much I had missed him.

"Moni," I called her to help me clean the chamber, and she gathered the other attendants.

We began with the bathing chamber, then the dressing room, followed by the guest chamber and the courtyard. We even trimmed the plants and grass in the garden. At last, I entered the bedroom.

After tidying up the bed and rearranging a few trunks, I walked to his almirah and opened it. Every item reminded me of him. I looked through his books, scrolls, and belongings.

A wide smile spread across my face as I pulled out his books one by one to wipe the dust. I opened a random one and read a few excerpts. They were mostly about politics, economics, and the histories of kingdoms.

Once I was done with the books, I started cleaning the scrolls.

But suddenly, they all slipped and scattered across the floor.

I let out a frustrated sigh and knelt to gather them. That's when my eyes landed on a yellow letter, half-open, with a seal that read: Songarh.

"S...on...ga..rh," I read slowly, struggling with the words, and yes, it clearly read Songarh.

Frowning, I picked up the letter. Unrolling it fully, I began reading, expecting it to be some old invitation.

But as my eyes scanned the words, tears welled up in my eyes, and I collapsed to my knees.

Prince Ranvijay,

I propose the marriage of my youngest daughter, Aishwarya, to you in exchange for 1,00,000 gold coins. Songarh will be happy to help Suryagarh if you promise to keep my daughter happy in all circumstances.

I look forward to hearing from you with a positive response.

**Raja Sondev,
Songarh.**

It read.

My chest suddenly tightened.

It means I am sold to him.

That meant he had purchased me from my father, just as one would buy cattle or sacks of wheat. And furniture.

How could he?

And for 1,00,000 gold coins?

That meant he was being kind to me because he was paid to be kind.

That meant he was good to me because he was told to be.

And his mother's bangles that I was wearing were just an illusion, a cover to fool me.

How could he?

How could my father have done that to me?

I broke into silent sobs and looked around. The hushed corners of the chamber echoed with the haunting sound of 1,00,000 gold coins crashing through my mind. I imagined a large sack full of them in exchange for me.

Was the business he encouraged just another way to extract more value from me?

Was I nothing but a financial alliance?

"Princess," Moni's voice cut through my spiralling thoughts, and I quickly wiped away my tears.

“Ji?” I asked, trying to compose myself.

She looked at me with a puzzled expression and said, “Don’t cry now, please. Hukum has already left for Suryagarh. He’ll be here the day after tomorrow. Ranaji received the letter and asked me to inform you.”

My heart shattered even more.

He didn’t tell me. He hid it from me.

And once again, he’d return and pretend to love me, because he was brought to do so.

How could I have been so deceived by his lies?

I should’ve known better. He was so perfect. So handsome. And I... what was I compared to him?

Why would someone like him marry a girl like me?

The pain was unbearable. I didn’t know what to do. But I knew one thing: I could no longer look him in the eyes.

He had deceived me and used me. And made me believe that I mattered, when in reality, I was just... a source of income.

I stood up, quickly stuffed the scrolls back into the almirah, and closed it.

I didn’t want to talk to him. I couldn’t stay here. Not a moment longer.

“Moni,” I turned to her, and she answered gently.

“Ji?”

“Can you get me a quill and paper?”

I had decided to go back to Songarh.

I wasn’t a sack of wheat, a piece of furniture, or a commodity he could trade.

No one could receive payment to maintain my happiness.

He was forced into this relationship with me, and he shouldn’t have been.

My heart was breaking as I wrote:

Hukum,

Humein is satya ka bodh nahi tha ki aap is sambandh mein yun bandhe hue the. Jyonki ab hum humaare vivaah ki vastavikata se avgat ho gaye hain,

to humein samajh hi nahi aa raha ki hum kya kahein. Kintu hum itna jaante hain ki ab hum yahaan nahi reh paayenge. Ataha, hum Songarh laut rahein hain.

Aishwarya.

(I was unaware of the truth that you were bound to this relationship in such a way. Now that I know the reality of our marriage, I no longer know what to say. However, what I do know is that I cannot stay here any longer. Therefore, I am returning to Songarh.)

I rolled the letter and wiped the fresh tears running down my cheeks. I didn't know what else to do, but I couldn't face him... not after learning that he was forced into this marriage. And unlike me, he never even showed it.

From the beginning, he behaved as if everything between us was normal, natural, even romantic, as if destiny had brought us together.

But how could I have been so naïve? How did I forget that he was such a handsome man, someone women would fall to their knees for? He didn't need me. He never needed me.

He was just playing his part for those hundred thousand gold coins.

How did my father do that to me? How could he even think of it?

I stood up from the writing table and left the letter there for him.

"Moni," I called, and she looked at me worriedly.

"Can you pack my things?"

She immediately came closer. "But why, Princess? Are you going somewhere? Is something wrong? Why are you crying? What happened?"

Her questions made me cry harder, and I couldn't hold it in anymore. I shook my head, forcing myself to speak.

"Nothing. I... I want to meet my father." I said it somehow.

She looked at me carefully and gave a hesitant nod. "Okay. But are you sure you're okay?"

I nodded again.

My head was pounding with the memories crashing into each other, overwhelming my mind. *How could he do that to me?*

Well... I was nothing to him.

Why would a man like him ever care for a girl like me?

That's why he never protested at the wedding. That's why he never tried to even look at me before the ceremony, because he didn't need to.

All he needed was gold. For his kingdom. For his people. That's who he truly was.

"Moni," I called again, and she lifted her gaze.

"Ji?"

I sat down on the couch, unable to hold myself up anymore.

"Can you ask the palanquin to be prepared? I want to leave now."

She frowned. "But, Princess, Ranaji and Rani-sa have gone to the temple. Let them return—"

"No," I interrupted, shaking my head. "Tell them after I leave."

She stared at me in confusion. "But are you sure? Why such urgency?"

I wiped my tears with the back of my hand. "Yes, I'm fine." But I wasn't.

There was no chance that Ranaji and Jiji didn't know about this trade. And suddenly... I wasn't able to trust anyone.

It had been over five months since the wedding. Everyone had been kind, loving, supportive, but no one told me the truth.

Why was I even blaming them, though? The proposal had come from my father. He was the one who fixed everything.

The same father I had loved, despite not receiving the same in return.

Suddenly, my life felt even emptier than ever before. The only person I had opened up to, told everything to, turned

out to be... my buyer, like I was his slave. And he, my master.

I took a sharp breath and stood up.

Walking over to the trunk Moni had packed, I slowly opened it and looked at all the things inside.

One by one, I pulled out everything I had bought from the market that day. I didn't need them anymore.

My father was wealthy enough. He had already bought Hukum for me.

I didn't even know what I was thinking anymore. All I knew was I had to leave. Because suddenly, nothing felt right. And I didn't know what else to do.

I didn't want to wait for him. I didn't want to talk to him. I just wanted to go back and accept my life for what it truly was.

At least in Songarh, my sister's hatred was real.

But here... everything was a trade, a deal.

I called for an attendant to take the trunk, and I walked towards the palanquin that waited outside.

Deep inside, a part of me wanted to wait... to talk to him... to ask for answers.

But what was left to ask?

My father had sold my happiness.

And as for Hukum, I no longer knew what his emotions were, because they had all been bought.

Even if I waited and talked to him, he would say that everything was fine. But I couldn't stop thinking about whether he would ever understand that I was not okay.

I didn't want wealth. I wanted nothing except love. But I didn't know that even God couldn't give me that.

I sat in the palanquin silently. I wasn't sure what I was feeling anymore. Or if I was even feeling anything at all.

It was as if... somewhere deep down, I had always known this would happen. Somewhere, I knew this moment was waiting for me.

Because my life had always been so: a moment of love... followed by an eternity of pain.

And the moment of love had passed with the beginning of the eternity of pain.

The lifters raised the palanquin, and more tears began rolling down my cheeks.

My heart was breaking in a way it never had before.

Nothing... nothing had hurt like this. Not even my wedding. Not even my sister's taunts. Nothing compared to this ache in my chest.

With him, I had believed that I deserved love. That I deserved appreciation. That I deserved to exist.

But suddenly, I realised that I was being given those things for one lakh gold coins.

I never knew that love could be bought.

I took a trembling breath and stared at the sun slowly setting behind the mountains. I didn't feel hungry or thirsty.

Only his memories... his voice... his eyes... had clouded my mind.

By midnight, our small convoy reached the grand entrance of Songarh. The fire torches flared high, and the soldiers stood alert. When they lowered the palanquin, I stepped out slowly.

The main soldier recognised me instantly. He gave a respectful bow and ordered the gates to be opened. Two of them rushed inside, probably to inform my father.

I felt nervous, afraid of what questions he might ask.

But beneath that fear... a storm of rage was rising within me.

But at that moment, I just wanted to be alone.

Moments later, I saw my old father hurrying toward me worriedly.

"Aishwarya!"

He called my name, and I bent down to touch his feet.

"Is everything okay? You're here at this time? Where is Prince Ranvijay? Didn't he come with you?"

Tears fell silently from my eyes with each question.

"No... no one knows I came here," I said.

He looked even more worried. "But why? What happened? Did something go wrong? Did you two fight?"

I took a deep breath. "Baapu-sa, you once told me... if I ever came home, you wouldn't ask me anything."

He sighed heavily and nodded. "Yes. Yes, come inside."

He walked me to my old chamber, and I sank onto the couch.

"Bring dinner for her, and prepare the bath," he ordered the attendants.

"I'm not hungry," I whispered, closing my eyes.

"Ekaant," I added.

I could feel the tension in the room. The silence was suffocating.

The attendants began leaving one by one, but I could still sense my father's presence.

"I should inform Suryagarh that you've reached safely," he said, and I immediately shook my head.

"No, I'll tell you what I want to convey to Suryagarh. To Prince Ra... Ran... Hukum."

Tears flowed again, and I broke into quiet sobs.

"Okay," he said softly.

"Leave me alone, please," I requested, and heard his footsteps retreating slowly from the chamber.

Everything was so silent.

And yet, inside me, a storm roared louder than ever. The weather outside had turned cold, and I already felt feverish and sick.

I crawled into bed and pulled the comforter over myself. My head throbbed, my heart ached, and his memories wouldn't stop replaying.

The way he looked at me when we first met... Our wedding rituals... His first gift... His teachings... Every memory was beautiful, and yet, every memory now felt bought.

My father... he had traded that beauty. He had sold my happiness.

I could feel my temperature rising. My head was hurting. And at some point, I slipped into a darkness so deep, it felt like death.



I regained consciousness with the soft sounds of voices around me.

My head felt unbearably heavy, and cold droplets of water trickled down both sides of my forehead.

"Aishwarya..."

I was feeling weak and lifeless. And I couldn't move.

"Aishwarya!"

I heard my name again, but it was distant.

As I struggled to open my eyes, everything was a blur, and my eyes burned from the heat of the fever.

"Aishwarya, wake up."

It was Baapu-sa's voice. I turned my head slightly and saw him sitting beside me. His eyes were filled with tears.

An older lady, possibly a **Vaidya**, gently placed her hand on my arm.

"She's conscious now. I hope the fever will break soon."

Blinking slowly, I tried to focus and glanced around the room. My body ached all over.

And then my breath caught.

I saw a figure standing silently by the side of the bed, leaning against the carved wooden pole, watching me.

No, he can't be here. I reminded myself.

I blinked harder to get a clear view.

And... It was him.

He was really here. And he was looking at me... with no emotion on his face.

"We should let her eat something first. Her body is weak," I heard the voice of the same elderly woman.

"She's conscious now. Everyone should rest for a while," Baapu-sa said firmly.

I watched them walk away, and I closed my eyes in exhaustion.

The faint clink of a metallic bowl being placed beside me echoed in my ears.

I sucked on my lower lip and realised my mouth tasted foul. It felt dry, bitter, and coated with the disgusting aftertaste of medicines.

"Water..." I tried to say.

The woman gently brought a small bowl to my lips and helped me sip the water. But then, "Let me do it. Leave us alone," I heard his voice.

And suddenly, I felt weaker than before.

No. No. I didn't want to be alone with him. But the words didn't come out. My lips refused to move.

I glanced at Baapu-sa and the physician walking out of the room.

He sat beside me and reached forward to offer me water, but most of it spilt from the side of my mouth, making me feel more helpless and disgusted with myself.

"Why are you here?" I asked.

He inhaled deeply and replied in a tone I couldn't place. "I didn't want to come. Your father called me."

His words struck me harder than I had expected. They felt so dry and... distant.

When I looked at him, his face held no expression. But I could feel it.

He was angry.

But what right did he have?

"How much did he offer this time?" I asked bitterly, trying to sit up.

He stared at me in disarray. "What do you mean?" he asked.

I pushed myself against the stack of pillows with effort, breathing heavily.

“Nothing,” I muttered and reached for the bowl, attempting to feed myself.

But before I could grasp it, he took it from me again.

“You were missing your father? You could have waited for me, and we would’ve visited together, baby. What was the hurry in coming like this, uninformed?”



32 Ranvijay

I was in the middle of the final meeting of my tour, seated in the royal court of Ratangarh, when a soldier quietly entered the hall.

In the presence of thirty men, he walked toward me and silently handed me a letter.

"...and we think it's not the best decision. I mean, if the enemy is positioned where Prince Ranvijay is suggesting..."

The voice faded from my ears as I unrolled the letter and instinctively glanced at the seal at the bottom.

SONGARH.

Frowning, I stood up at once. "Excuse me," I said firmly and walked out of the meeting hall. My pulse quickened without warning.

I read the letter in full: Aishwarya had left Suryagarh, informing no one, travelling to Songarh alone with a small convoy. She'd fallen severely ill upon arrival and had been crying my name in her unconscious sleep.

By the end of the letter, I felt my chest tighten.

I turned to the attendant beside me. "Ask someone to pack my things immediately."

Without waiting for a reply, I returned to the hall and addressed the assembly.

"I apologise, but I can no longer attend this meeting due to an urgent matter. Commander Eklavya will represent Suryagarh in my place."

He stepped forward with a nod of understanding.

"Thank you for your warm hospitality," I added, then turned and strode out of the hall.

There was no time to waste. I rushed to the stables and readied my horse myself, instructing the rest of my convoy to follow once they gathered my things.

I needed to reach her, and so I rode hard from Ratangarh toward Songarh as fast as I could.

My mind was all over the place. I couldn't focus. A storm of thoughts churned inside me.

Did the business not do well?

Was she overwhelmed by the sex conversation?

Was she upset with me for leaving?

That last one made the most sense.

Maybe she was angry that I went on this tour without her.

By late afternoon, I urged my horse to move faster. My hair flew behind me in the wind. My mind refused to rest. Something didn't feel right.

By the time I reached Songarh, evening had fallen. I stepped off my horse to find her father waiting at the gate.

His face was etched with worry.

I bent to touch his feet. "What happened?" I asked immediately.

He sighed. "We don't know. She arrived around midnight without any word, no message in advance. She looked disturbed, and as soon as she arrived, she went to bed. And this morning, we found her burning up with a fever and unconscious. She hasn't opened her eyes since."

I inhaled deeply and strode into the palace toward her chamber.

When I entered, I saw the room crowded with physicians and attendants. She lay still on the bed. And the moment I saw her, my gut twisted.

It felt as if I'd lost something... really precious.

A horrible thought entered my mind: *Did something happen to her during the journey?*

I turned to her father. "Was she okay when she arrived?"

"Yes... she didn't have a fever, but she looked upset," he said, clearly uncertain.

I stepped closer and sat at her side. Her hair, as always, spilt over her cheek. Even when she was sick, she still looked beautiful.

I couldn't stop myself from touching her face, and the moment I felt her burning temperature, I turned sharply to the physician sitting beside her.

"What the hell are you doing? She's flaming hot."

The woman flinched at my firm tone. "We're trying our best—"

"Try harder," I snapped and rose from the bed to send an urgent letter to Suryagarh asking if anyone knew the reason for her sudden departure.

I had to know what really happened.

After handing over the letter to the messenger, I returned and stood near her bed, leaning against the side pole.

Her condition made me feel powerless.

I saw her eyelids slowly flutter, and although I didn't know why, I felt angry. She could've waited a day. Why did she leave so late and arrive at midnight? This wasn't right. She shouldn't have done that.

Aishwarya's father sat quietly by her side, calling her name, but she didn't respond. I could hear the concern in his voice, growing with each attempt, yet I stayed where I was.

At last, she stirred and slowly opened her eyes. The physician checked her condition and advised her to rest and eat something, assuring us that the fever would likely break soon.

I let out a slow breath of relief. And though I wanted to speak to her, I waited until she felt at ease. She needed rest and food.

Her father nodded in agreement, asking everyone to rest.

But when I found her eyes on mine, there was no joy in them. Perhaps it was the fever.

"Water..." Her feeble voice reached my ears, and a wave of pain surged through my veins. I had been dying to see her, but not like this.

What the hell happened?

When the physician was helping her sip water from a bowl, I stepped in, unable to bear it anymore.

Once everyone had quietly left the room, I sat beside her and lifted the bowl to her lips, but most of the liquid spilt down her chin.

"Why are you here?" she asked dryly, and I could sense the bitterness in her tone. But she knew I had work. Why was she even angry?

"I didn't want to come. Your father called me," I said, matching her tone. I didn't know why, but I was angry too.

"How much did he offer this time?" she asked, and my brows furrowed with confusion.

"What do you mean?"

She pushed herself up, resting against the pile of pillows. I wanted to scold her for exerting herself in this condition, but I swallowed it back.

"Nothing," she muttered.

I took a deep breath, trying to stay calm. When she tried to reach for the bowl of food beside her, I stopped her slowly, taking it from her, and spoke in a soft voice,

"You were missing your father? You could have waited for me, and we would've visited together, baby. What was the hurry in coming like this, uninformed?"

She looked at me with a shocked expression, and her fingers trembled as she tried to take the bowl from my hand, but I immediately held it back.

"Is something wrong, Aishwarya?" I asked gently.

Rather than responding, I noticed tears running down her cheeks. And the moment I saw her cry, my heart crumbled.

I moved closer. "Hey... what happened? It's okay. It's just a fever. And it's okay that you came here. I understand you were feeling alone, right? It's okay."

I tried to take her hand, but she pulled it away from mine. Only then did I notice she wasn't wearing the gold bangles I'd given her.

She lowered her gaze.

I held out my hand to feed her, struggling to hide how my heart was breaking, but she shook her head, rejecting the food.

"I don't think you even want to be here," she whispered in a fragile voice.

I leaned closer, asking, "And why would you think that?"

She raised her eyes to meet mine. "Because you married me out of obligation. You were forced."

My brows drew in. "No. Who told you that?"

She looked away as more tears streamed down her cheeks. "I know the truth. I read... I read the agreement."

My eyes widened. "Agreement? What agreement?"

She looked at me with dull eyes. "The one between you and my father."

A shocking jolt ran through me.

"How do you know about that?"

"I found it in your almirah. I read it."

"You... you read it yourself?" I asked, stunned.

She nodded, this time with defiance.

"Yes. I read it. And I don't want to be with you anymore. It was all fake, a trade. No one ever told me the truth—"

"My baby has learned to read, finally... oh my God!" I couldn't hold it. I instantly leaned in and tried to hug her.

But before my arms could wrap around her, she pushed me away, and I stared at her in shock.

"Don't call me that," she snapped.

"What?" I blinked.

"'Baby.' You don't mean that," her voice crackled by the end.

But my heart was swelling with pride. I couldn't stop a smile from curving my lips.

"Stop smiling. I'm hurt," she whispered, and more tears rolled down.

"I'm proud of you," I said quietly.

She gritted her teeth and shoved my hand away. "Leave me alone."

"I will. But only after you eat and take your medicine," I replied with a gentle smile.

"You think this is funny?" she burst out. "You took one lakh gold coins to marry me and keep me happy. You were acting all along, and even now you're pretending like nothing happened!"

She wiped her cheeks furiously, and I exhaled deeply, reaching for her hand again. She tried to pull it back, but I held it firmly.

"It was just a proposal, Aishwarya. I denied it."

She looked at me dubiously. "You're lying."

"Why would I lie?"

"Because you don't want to upset me."

I nodded. "Yes. I didn't want to upset you, which is exactly why I never accepted that proposal. But yes, your father did extend a loan to Suryagarh."

Her eyes narrowed. "Then why did you accept the marriage proposal?"

I moved closer, slowly wrapping my arms around her. She stiffened, but this time she didn't push me away.

"Because I was worried about you. Because your father was ready to marry you off with money, and I didn't like that. If I had refused, you would have been the one to suffer. I accepted the proposal so that you wouldn't be hurt. Was that wrong?"

She looked up at me.

"But... you didn't even know me," she whispered.

I leaned down and pressed a kiss on her forehead. "But I know you now, baby."

"Then why didn't you tell me before?"

I brought the bowl closer to feed her.

"You tell me, if you had found out about this earlier, what would you have done?"

She paused and looked at me.

In a quiet voice, she answered. "Nothing. Because I've only recently learned how to choose for myself, I would've

accepted it and lived with it.”

“Exactly. That’s why I never told you. Because it didn’t matter anymore, it was just a proposal, and your father already apologised to both of us.” I said, forwarding the spoon to her mouth.

She stared at it briefly, then silently took a bite.

After a long moment, she asked softly, “Do you love me... for real?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Don’t tell me you got a fever because of that stupid letter? I swear I’ll kill you, Aishwarya. For real.”



33 Aishwarya

His voice was a mix of frustration and deep concern. And I could only look at him, swallowing with anxiety.

He wrapped his arm around my shoulder and brought the spoon toward my mouth.

I didn't know why, but I wanted to trust him. His lips carried a faint smile, and maybe... maybe this is exactly what I craved... this closeness.

I wanted him to talk to me. I wanted his entire attention.

"Come on, baby," he coaxed gently, and I parted my lips.

As the sour, unpleasant taste of the soup hit my tongue, a lump rose in my throat, and I broke into a harsh cough.

Sudden pain burst in my chest as the coughing worsened.

He quickly began patting my back as I struggled to steady my breath.

"Careful, Aishwarya," he murmured, offering me a glass of water.

I took a few sips, trying to calm my racing heartbeat. He resumed feeding me, spoon by spoon, offering the soup with patience and a little appreciation with each bite, until the bowl was empty.

"Aapne bhojan kiya?" (Have you had dinner?) I asked in a low voice.

He smiled, answering, "I will. But first, you take your medicine and sleep now."

He passed me a small bowl of dark liquid.

"I have to tell you so much," I whispered.

Instead of replying, he nudged the bowl toward my lips and made me drink the nastiest liquid in the world. My tongue stung, but as the bitter medicine slid down my throat, I felt it spread a strange warmth through my chest.

"I'll listen to everything when you're better," he said and helped me lie down. He pulled the comforter up to my chest

and brushed a strand of hair from my face, pressing a tender kiss to my forehead.

"Sleep tight, baby," he said, standing up to leave, but I instinctively reached for his hand.

He paused and turned to me.

"Aap rusht hain humse?" (Are you angry with me?) I asked softly.

"No, baby. Why would I be angry?" he replied, then sat beside me again.

"Then why are you leaving me?" I asked, shifting my head from the pillow onto his lap.

He helped me settle and slowly brushed my hair away from my face.

"I'm not leaving you. I just want you to rest."

"I am resting," I said quietly.

He placed his palm lovingly over my head.

"I'm sorry, Hukum," I whispered. "But I couldn't think straight. I thought you were forced into this marriage, and I didn't want that. I thought you were such a handsome man, and you married a girl like me. How could that not be because of some agreement?"

He just kept caressing my head softly, relaxing me.

"I love you, Aishwarya, indubitably. There's nothing anymore for you to be insecure about. I am here with you... for you until my last breath. We're together in this. We will argue, make mistakes, and yet grow together. No matter the circumstances, I will never leave you. Because I'm married to you, and that stays for life."

A quiet warmth bloomed in my chest at his words, and I looked up at him with a smile.

But he looked tired. His hair was falling over his forehead, and his eyes were red with exhaustion.

"You should sleep too, Hukum," I whispered.

He smiled. "Not yet. I need a bath before I touch that bed, and I'm starving." He chuckled by the end, and I smiled in return.

"I'm sorry... Yes, you should eat and bathe," I said, shifting slightly to sit up. "I'll wait for you."

Getting out of bed, he walked toward the bathroom. "I'll be back soon," he promised.

I watched him disappear behind the curtain and heard the sound of running water filling the room. My mind felt lighter, way better than before.

And then I remembered what Jiji had said about growing old with someone. He had just said the same. That thought alone made a smile stretch across my face.

Soon, he returned to the chamber, and my breath hitched at the sight of him, half-naked with just a white cloth loosely wrapped around his waist. Water dripped down his chest, trailing along his skin as he ran his fingers through wet hair.

"Stop staring, Aishwarya," he said without even glancing at me.

I sat up slightly and stared more, without any hesitation.

"Why?" I asked, swallowing hard as he settled onto the couch.

He clapped twice, and moments later, an attendant hurried in. The second her eyes landed on him, her cheeks flushed crimson.

"Please bring me something to eat. And have my clothes washed before sunrise," he said.

The attendant nodded, rushed toward the bathing room to collect his clothes, and left.

After a while, food arrived, and I shifted to sit up properly, propped against pillows. He looked up from his plate and smiled at me.

"Stop watching, Aishwarya," he said again, this time with a teasing smirk.

I shook my head. "No."

He took a bite, and I could tell how hungry he was. With each movement, his arms and chest flexed, making it harder for me to look away.

He lifted his eyes again to me. "Okay, come here."

I stepped out of bed and walked toward him. He moved slightly to make space, and I sat beside him.

He held out a bite toward me, and I accepted it, not because I was hungry, but because I missed him terribly.

"Feeling better now?" he asked.

I smiled. "What happened to me?" I asked playfully.

He chuckled softly and asked in a low voice, "So... you got angry because you thought I took gold coins to marry you?"

I nodded. "Not just angry. I was hurt. I thought every moment we shared, every emotion you showed, was part of the wage you'd been paid to keep me happy."

He didn't respond immediately, just offered me another bite of food with a faint smile.

"You didn't trust me? Not even enough to wait until I returned so that we could talk?" he asked in a calm voice, laced with hurt.

I drew a breath. "I believed it was true. And I didn't want to be in a marriage where my happiness was bought. So, no, I wasn't expecting an explanation." I leaned against his arm and closed my eyes. "I'm sorry, Hukum." My tone softened with regret.

He didn't reply, but the silence between us felt comforting. His freshly bathed skin was warm yet cold in some places.

"How's your business going?" he asked after a pause.

I looked up at him and instantly broke into a wide smile.

"It's doing well. Since it is the initial stage, it is quite slow, so we're shifting strategies, focusing more on the women in the kingdoms," I exclaimed enthusiastically.

We kept talking as he finished his dinner. I told him about our new plans, the people we'd hired, and the challenges. His face lit up with every detail I shared.

I could see how impressed and proud he was.

"I'm proud of you, Aishwarya," he said.

"Really?" I asked, tilting my head sideways.

He nodded. "Yes," and kissed my forehead. "Now you should get some sleep."

I frowned. "You're not coming to bed?"

He shook his head. "I have a few letters to send."

I swallowed and nodded, then stood up from the couch. It was past midnight, and most of the lamps had gone out, leaving only a few heavily oiled ones casting a dim golden glow across the chamber.

I climbed onto the bed, lying on my side, but my gaze stayed on him. He was bent over the desk, writing something on the letters with quiet focus.

I didn't know why, but he looked even more handsome.

Maybe because I hadn't seen him properly in two months... or maybe because something inside me had shifted.

I felt perfectly fine. I just wanted to be close to him. I didn't know why, but an urge was building inside me to be near him, to be in his arms. His lips looked beautiful, and I couldn't stop staring as he sat there, writing letters.

My thoughts wandered to what Jiji had said about pleasing a man.

Kiss him the way he kisses you... everywhere.

But I was scared, because he looked tense. Maybe he was still angry.

Suddenly, he stood up from the couch, and I felt a slight shiver run down my spine. I glanced between the comforter and him.

The white cotton cloth wrapped around his waist hung low on his hips, and I knew he wore nothing beneath it.

I watched him move toward the bed and instinctively closed my eyes.

I felt the mattress dip as he lay beside me. Without a word, he pulled me into his arms, causing my eyes to fly open.

My heart pounded wildly in my chest. As his bare chest pressed against mine, I realised I wasn't wearing my

dupatta.

His arm slid around my waist, making me sigh softly. "Hukum," he smiled, brushing the hair away from my face. "I haven't even bathed today," I whispered.

He cupped my cheeks, pressing a soft kiss to my lips. "Dirty or clean... you're still mine," he murmured.

A slight smile tugged at my lips, though the air between us felt heavy, sending a heat through me.

"Hukum..." I called again.

He inhaled deeply, closing his eyes, and hummed in response.

"I... I asked Jiji. And she said... it's true," I spoke in a trembling voice.

He smiled suddenly, as if my words had brought him joy. "I told you," he whispered, pressing his forehead to mine. "I missed you so much."

He moved closer, gently easing his body over mine as he kissed the base of my neck. My heart thundered in my chest. I didn't know where to put my hands.

His arms slid beneath me, letting his full weight settle over me.

Slowly, I gathered the courage to wrap my arms around his shoulders. His breath was calm against my neck, but it ignited something wild inside me.

The rhythm of his breathing stirred goosebumps across my skin. I closed my eyes, feeling his forehead rest against my cheek.

His bare leg draped over mine, pinning me beneath him, so even if I wanted to move, I couldn't.

Strangely, I began craving his touch. My inner thighs throbbed with an unfamiliar ache. A sudden, overwhelming need for his fingers to touch me there... and inside bloomed in me.

My lips parted as unrelenting heat built within me.

Inhaling deeply, I tried to steady my breath. "I feel hot, Hukum," I whispered, trying to make sense of what was

happening to me.

His voice came out hoarse as he replied lazily, "It's alright. It'll help break your fever."

I pressed my lips to his shoulder, seeking comfort in the warmth of his skin.

"Hukum," I breathed again, more uncertain this time.

A desperation was building within me, and I felt a need to be touched by him.

"T-touch me, please," my voice wavered as I finally spoke.

He kissed my cheek softly and replied in an inaudible murmur, "Not tonight, baby."

I tried to push against his shoulder, wanting to see his eyes. And looking at his half-asleep face, I let out a deep sigh of frustration.

"Why not?"

He gently took my wrist and pinned it above my head.

"When you wear those golden bangles again," he said, and I stilled, realising he had noticed I wasn't wearing them.

"I'm sorry... I didn't mean to hurt you," I whispered.

"You meant to hurt me, Aishwarya," he replied, and a faint smile touched my lips.

"Okay, yes. I did. I meant to hurt you because—"

"Yes, I understand, baby. Now sleep," he cut me off in a drowsy tone.

I drew a sharp breath. If he didn't want to touch me, why was he lying on top of me? Irritated, I tried to pull my hand free and pushed against him.

"Ughh.. you're heavy... move aside," I muttered.

He shifted to his side and then immediately pulled me close again. When I glanced at his face, I found him asleep already.

With his arm wrapped securely around me, I lay there, staring at his peaceful expression. After a while, I closed my eyes too and didn't even realise when sleep overtook me.



I woke to the faint rustling of movement in the chamber. My arm stretched across the bed instinctively, searching for him. Finding the space beside me empty, I squinted against the soft light filtering in through the drapes.

Yawning, I sat up and looked around, when my eyes fell on him. He was already dressed and was seated on the couch, holding a letter.

Sensing I was awake, he lifted his gaze.

"Good morning," he said with a smile.

A smile tugged at my lips. "Good morning, Hukum,"

"How are you feeling now?"

"Better," I said, pushing the comforter aside and stepping off the bed. My body felt really fresh and lighter.

He looked down and suggested in a calm voice, "I think you should stay here a little longer. Return to Suryagarh only when you feel truly ready, when your mind is light."

I walked to him and stood in front of the couch.

"I feel better now. And I want to return with you, Hukum. I'm sorry I left without telling you," I said quietly.

He looked up at me again. "I just think... showing up here at midnight, and now suddenly leaving with me is not right. You should spend a little time with your father and leave peacefully."

I turned my lashes south. "Weren't two months enough apart?" I muttered under my breath.

"It's not about being apart, Aishwarya. But we must be responsible for how we behave in front of others. No action of ours should mislead people into believing that something has gone wrong between us. So, let the chaos calm,"

I nodded slightly and lowered my gaze before murmuring, "But people are waiting for me. I have a business to manage, and several meetings are pending."

At that, a playful smile appeared on his lips. "Oh... a business to manage, I see." I giggled and heard him ask,

“So, you’re really coming with me? No more rest?”

“Yes, I’m coming. I need no more rest,” I said firmly.

He nodded. “Alright, get ready soon then.”

Without delay, I ran into the bathroom to take a bath. The water was cold, but I didn’t care. I wanted to go back with him.

I dressed quickly in a bright pink outfit. My wrists felt strangely bare and lighter without my golden bangles.

When I stepped back into the room, I found him already seated on the couch, and the breakfast laid before him. He was reading something, but the moment the sound of my anklets echoed across the chamber, he looked up.

A smile slowly spread across his face, and his gaze swept over me from head to toe, finally lingering on my eyes.

“Seems like you have plans for tonight,” he intoned, and a sparkling shiver ran down my spine.

“I don’t know,” I replied just as quietly.

I sat beside him and dared to lift my gaze.

“Breakfast,” he said, and I nodded.

We began our meal in silence, but his eyes didn’t leave mine for even a moment. His unwavering gaze made me nervous; my hands fidgeted as I struggled to focus on the food.

After we finished, he asked me to meet my father before we left. I nodded and quietly stepped out of the chamber.

“Baapu-sa,” I called softly as I entered his chamber and found him seated on the couch. His lips curved into a faint smile when he saw me approaching.

“Aishwarya, come sit here,” he said, patting the space beside him. I sat down silently. “Are you alright now?” he asked, and I gave a small nod.

“Yes, I’m feeling much better,” I replied.

He gently caressed my head, then asked, “What happened between you two? Is everything resolved now?”

I took a deep breath and slowly nodded. “I read that letter you gave him... about the one hundred thousand gold coins

in exchange for my happiness,” I said quietly.

His eyes dropped, and he shook his head.

“I’m so sorry for that, Aishwarya. I truly liked him for you, and I couldn’t think of anything else. But trust me, he didn’t accept the offer. He refused it outright. He’s a genuine man. What I offered was merely a political loan, nothing more.” His voice trembled slightly as he revealed the truth, and I nodded.

“Yes, he told me everything. I’m sorry, Baapu-sa. When I read that letter, I felt deeply betrayed. I didn’t know what else to do, so I came here,” I confessed.

His brows furrowed suddenly. “You read that? You’ve started reading?” he asked, astonished.

I nodded slowly. “Yes, he taught me how to read and write. He also helped me set up a business, something I truly enjoy.”

“Oh...” He looked stunned. “Wow. That’s... that’s good to hear. But... everyone supports you in this?” he asked, still disbelieving.

“Yes, Ranaji, Jiji, Devar-sa, Hukum... everyone has been incredibly supportive. They even help me with many things,” I said softly.

He placed his hand gently on my head. “That’s wonderful, Aishwarya. I’m proud of you,” he said with a smile.

I hesitated, then quietly asked, “Baapu-sa, I’m sorry for coming here like that... but I want to return with him today.”

He smiled and nodded. “Of course, my child. You should go with him.”

Just then, Hukum’s voice echoed from outside the room. “Ready.”

I immediately stood up, and my father rose from the couch as well. As I bent to touch his feet, he opened his arms and embraced me instead.

“Come here,” he said, and hugged both of us together.

“May God bless you both with all my happiness... and I hope you have a beautiful child soon,” he added.

Embarrassed, I quickly stepped back and lowered my gaze.

"I hope everything is sorted now, Prince Ranvijay," my father said.

Hukum nodded and replied, "Ji. And thank you for informing me about her arrival here before anyone else."

Baapu-sa nodded, and Hukum glanced at me with a slight smirk, making my stomach twist with nervousness.

He walked with us to the main entrance of the kingdom, where his horse and my palanquin awaited.

He helped me into the palanquin, and I asked an attendant to sit with me. Through the small gap in the curtain, I watched him mount his horse.

We began our journey back to Suryagarh.

My thoughts were a storm of him, of everything that had happened, but one feeling remained persistent: I wanted to be close to him.

He hadn't said much, but I could sense what he desired now. There was a quiet detachment between us, and I desperately wanted to bridge it.

Perhaps it was due to the pressure of his duties, or maybe the timing hadn't been right over the past few days. I didn't know.

But something told me that once we reached Suryagarh, things might change.

And though a part of me was afraid, I also longed for it.

Jiji had once said that coming close to your partner isn't just about physical need. It's about emotional intimacy, about choosing to surrender and showing trust. It is about love.

Being intimate wasn't merely about one physical act; it was about connection, transferring energies, spirituality, trust, love, and countless unspoken emotions.

And now... I wanted that with him. I wanted to feel him close again.

Suddenly, the palanquin stopped, and I peeked through the curtain, realising we had arrived. My thoughts had kept me occupied the entire journey.

“Aishwarya,”

Hearing his voice, I stepped out of the palanquin and saw him waiting.

I was anxious about how I would face Jiji. I knew she would definitely scold me.

I adjusted my dupatta and walked beside him toward the main entrance.

As we approached, I saw Jiji, Ranaji, and Devar-sa standing there.

My palms were clammy with nervous sweat, but Hukum assured me softly, “It’s okay, Aishwarya. It’s family.”

I took a deep breath and composed myself.

“Pranaam, Bhai-sa,” Hukum greeted, and we both bent to touch Ranaji’s feet.

“Pranaam, Bhabhi-sa.”

“Jiji,” I muttered softly as we touched her feet, too. She pulled me into a tight hug and patted my back.

“Never leave us like this again, understand? You could’ve at least waited for me to return before leaving, stupid girl,” she scolded gently, and the concern in her voice didn’t go unheard by me.

“I’m sorry, Jiji,” I whispered.

Then I heard Ranaji’s voice. “You are not just Aishwarya now, Aishwarya. You’re our rarest gem. You must take care of yourself.”

I didn’t respond. I had never spoken to him directly; it wasn’t appropriate for a daughter-in-law to converse with her elder brother-in-law. And for me, he was a fatherly figure.

“Bhabhi-sa!” Devarsa’s voice pulled me from my thoughts, and I smiled at the sight of him. “Your customers are already waiting for the next lot,” he said, trying to hug

me, but Hukum playfully placed a hand on his chest and tugged him into a side-hug.

“Yes, Bhai-sa, I know you missed me,” he playfully remarked, looking at Hukum.

As the two hugged, Hukum asked, “How are you, Agastya?”

Devar-sa smiled and stepped back. “Motivated to begin the next chapter of my life.”

Ranaji’s voice cut in. “Which chapter?”

Hukum smiled knowingly and said, “Come, let me tell you, Bhai-sa.”

The three brothers walked ahead, talking and laughing. Jiji fell into step beside me.

“Is everything okay now?” she asked gently, walking with me toward my chamber.

I nodded and told her everything. Then, after a brief pause, I finally asked what had been on my mind.

“Jiji... do you think it’s a good idea to begin the next chapter of our life tonight?”

Her smile widened immediately. “Why not?”

I inhaled deeply and looked at her with hesitant eyes. “But what exactly should I do? I mean... I think he’s still slightly upset with me. And what if—”

“Let me tell you,” she said, cutting me off, and made me sit on the bed. After seeing him, I was happy, but I felt equally jittery. My heart was caught in the storm of exhilaration.

Happy because he had come back. I was jittery because I had messed everything up.

He hadn’t shown anger, not once, but I knew I had hurt him, not by going to my father’s home, but by removing the golden bangles he had placed on my wrist with so much love.

“Aishwarya.” Jiji’s voice snapped me out of my thoughts, and I looked at her, smiling at me.

“Ji,” I whispered as she took my hand softly in hers.

"You want to do it because he's angry with you?" I shook my head instantly.

"No, Jiji."

"Then?" she asked gently, but I didn't miss the seriousness in her tone.

I couldn't answer immediately. I wasn't even sure myself. But I knew I wanted it.

My mind felt clouded, and my body had a whole different story to say. There was a hollowness inside me. An aching longing that only he could soothe.

"I want it... I mean, he wants it, and I want it too. I want to feel closer to him... I want to understand him more, spend time with him, and be completely his, like any other wife. I want us to be like a real couple... like you and Ranaji. And he told me he wants to grow old with me. What more is there to wait for?"

Her expression softened as I poured my heart out.

"You want to do it... and you won't regret it, no matter what happens?"

I nodded, inhaling deeply. "No. Hukum is the one I trust the most. And that trust only grew stronger after learning he never took a single coin for marrying me. He's the one who taught me how to be comfortable in my own skin and with others as well. I don't even recognise the old Aishwarya anymore,"

I swallowed the lump in my throat and continued, "I can speak freely without fearing judgment. I've started believing that I'm good, I'm beautiful... even without fair skin or the 'perfect' body expected of a princess. I'm following my passion now, all because of him. He made me like myself."

I blinked rapidly, fighting tears blurring my vision.

"Even when I make mistakes or mess up, I know he'll still be there. When I ran away like that... and he still came for me, without any blame, it made me trust him even more. I love him, Jiji. I want to give him all of me, to love, scold,

comfort, or shape him in any way he wants. And in return, all I want is his love... his care... his heart,"

I took a breath before finishing.

"At first, I didn't believe I was good enough for him. He's so handsome, smart and everything an exceptional man should be. I used to think we weren't even compatible. But when he said that he had eyes only for me... I felt it. I truly felt it, Jiji,"

She was listening closely, not interrupting once.

"He was away for two months. I could see how exhausted he was, yet he rushed to see me like I was the only thing that mattered. I mean, he could've waited, but he didn't. He just came, didn't scold me or show his anger. I want him, Jiji. I want all of him."

Tears welled in my eyes again as a wave of emotion rushed over me. Goosebumps rose as I remembered our first day of marriage, and then, this.

"But you know it'll hurt, right?"

I nodded slowly, gulping. "Yes... but he promised he won't be rough," I whispered.

Jiji chuckled softly. "Ohhh, already getting sensual promises, huh?"

I blinked in confusion. "What?"

She laughed. "Nothing. Don't overthink it. Just let it flow like water. Too much thinking ruins the pleasure."

"But... what am I supposed to do?" I asked hesitantly. "I mean, when he starts... I don't know anything."

With a mischievous grin, she moved her face slightly closer.

"When he begins, I mean, when he's inside you, and you see him holding back, looking a little tense or focused not to hurt you... wrap your arms around him, scratch his back, then grab his hips and pull him deeper."

My eyes widened. "Wh.. what? Grab his...? No! he won't like that!"

“He’ll love it,” she said firmly. “You want to please him, don’t you?”

I nodded quickly. “Of course. I just don’t know how it’ll feel.”

“Don’t worry. And honestly, I don’t think he’ll start anything yet; you just had a fever yesterday.”

“No, it was just from the cold. I’m fine. Please tell me more,” I pleaded.

She sighed dramatically. “What else do you want to know?”

I looked her straight in the eye. “Will it hurt him, too?”

A smile spread slowly across her face.

“You will see that. And one more thing, it will be better if you completely lose yourself in him. Don’t overthink, don’t tense up. Just trust him,” she said, and I nodded.

“All right,” I murmured, taking a deep breath as I looked at her. “Okay, Jiji, I’m all set. Let’s do it.”

She burst out laughing. “It’s not a horse race, Aishwarya. It’s lovemaking. The real spark is in the unexpected.”

I furrowed my brows. “Unexpected? The whole world knows what happens after marriage, and yet a thousand people are still invited to the weddings.”

She laughed even harder. “Oh my goodness, that’s a good one!”

Suddenly, a faint announcement of his arrival echoed through the hallways, and we both straightened. She quickly stood up from the bed and adjusted her dupatta over her head.

“Bhabhi-sa,” he greeted upon entering. His eyes flicked between the two of us. “Carry on with your talks, please. I’m just leaving.”

She shook her head politely. “No, Devar-sa, I was already leaving. I just came to check on her health, that’s all.”

He walked closer, and his gaze landed on me as he spoke.

“Aapko inhe daatna to chahiye kam se kam. Aap Rani-sa hain Suryagarh ki, aur ye aapko soochit kiye

bina hi chali gayin." (You should scold her a little at least. You're the Queen of Suryagarh, and she left without informing you.)

His words made my stomach twist, and I dropped my gaze, feeling the nerves tightening in my chest.

"It's okay, Devar-sa. All's well that ends well," Jiji replied, looking at me with a knowing smile. ***"Hum chalte hain, Aishwarya. Devar-sa ko aaj adhik tang na kariyega."*** (I'm leaving, Aishwarya. Don't trouble Devarsa too much today.)

My cheeks warmed at her teasing tone, and I nodded shyly as she left.

Attendants entered just then, carrying plates of food. I stepped down from the bed as he turned toward me with a slight frown of concern on his face.

"Is everything okay?" he asked.

I nodded quickly. "Yes, yes. All is good."

He turned to the attendants and said, "Then lunch? I'm sure you're hungry after all that travel."

His full lips moved with such ease as he spoke that I found myself staring before quickly nodding again and walking past him nervously.

He was still upset with me. If he weren't, he wouldn't have made that comment to Jiji. Maybe tonight wasn't such a good idea after all.

I sat quietly on the couch, unsure of what to say or how to make it up to him. My thoughts raced, and with every passing moment, my anxiety grew.

What should I do?

Suddenly, I saw him emerge from the dressing room.

When did he go in?

Swallowing hard, I lowered my gaze as he approached and sat down beside me.

"Give me your hands," he said in a low and serious tone.

I slowly extended my hands, watching as he gently took one in his and revealed the golden bangles in his other

hand.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered. "I didn't mean to hurt you, I just—"

"Shhh..." he hushed me softly.

I blinked, falling silent as he slid the bangles back onto my wrists.

"Bina kangan ke to Aishwarya, humaari Aishwarya hi nahi lagti." (Without these bangles, Aishwarya doesn't feel like my Aishwarya at all.) His voice was tender, and I bit my lower lip, overwhelmed with emotion.

"Are you busy this evening?" I asked softly.

He looked up, meeting my eyes with a stern look. "Why? What happened? Is everything okay?"

"Yes, yes, everything is fine," I said quickly. "I was just asking... casually."

He lowered his eyes again, focusing on my other wrist. His touch was a little rough, but comforting. It had been two long months since I'd felt his skin against mine.

"Actually," I blurted, surprising both of us.

He looked up. "What?"

I inhaled deeply, unsure how to begin... unsure even how to express what I was feeling.

"Umm... actually, I just want to spend some time with you. I mean, if you're free, I just want to talk and spe—"

"Okay," he interrupted, and I blinked in surprise.

"Okay? Are you... okay? I mean, really fine?"

He gave a slight nod, then turned his gaze toward the plate on the table.

"Let's eat," he said, and I nodded in silence.

We both started eating. I missed his usual smiles and teasing glances. He remained quiet, absorbed in his meal, and for some reason, I couldn't bring myself to start a conversation either.

Once he finished, he stood up and looked at me briefly.

"I'm going to the library," he said.

I could only nod again as he walked away, leaving me alone in the chamber. I rose from the couch and glanced down at the bangles on my wrists. I knew I had done nothing wrong, yet his silence told me he was hurt. I wanted things to go back to how they were before. I just wanted that smile back on his face.

And somewhere inside, I had a faint idea of what I needed to do.

As the evening settled over the palace, I asked Moni to lay out a fresh pair of clothes. After a quick bath, I changed into my usual nightwear.

I then asked her to dry my hair and braid it neatly. But as she worked, my nerves steadily grew. I wasn't sure what to expect when I faced him again.

Would he...? I mean... would tonight become our special night?

I waited for him quietly, but when he didn't return before sunset, I wandered over to the courtyard near the *jharokha* to watch the sky. The light faded slowly, and the stars began to appear, twinkling in the darkening, moonless night.

I lay down on the carpet I had picked from the market. A thousand thoughts swirled through my head as I lay there on my back, my knees slightly bent, my fingers absentmindedly twirling the end of my braid, and my eyes fixed on the sky.

"Princess," Moni's voice called gently. I turned my head toward her. "It's getting cold. You should rest inside. Hukum might be late, he sent word," she said softly.

A heaviness settled in my chest. Still, I shook my head.

"I'm fine here. You can go," I replied.

She gave a quiet nod and left.

I remained there alone until sleep slowly claimed me.

And then, somewhere in the middle of the night, I stirred, feeling his presence behind me.

I could feel his warmth even before I opened my eyes. Still half-asleep, my palm brushed the familiar fabric, confirming

I was in our chamber, on our bed. The lighting was low, the curtains were drawn tight, and everything around me was cloaked in silence.

I felt his fingers grazing my bare midriff and waist gently. Shifting beneath the comforter, I stretched slowly and heard him whisper close to my ear.

“Hey, baby.”

The sound of his voice made my thighs tense with a faint tremble.

Drowsily, I turned to face him. “Where were you?” I murmured, placing my hand on his arm, only then realising he wasn’t wearing a kurta.

“Studying,” he replied, and his lips found mine in a featherlight kiss.

“I was waiting for you...” I mumbled between the kisses.

His lips lingered near mine as he asked, “How are you feeling now?”

I opened my eyes slowly, meeting his gaze. He looked tired, but the love in his eyes made my heart flutter.

“Like never before,” I whispered, lifting my hand to cup his cheek. He closed his eyes and leaned into my touch, rubbing his cheek against my palm.

“I missed you so much, Aishwarya,” he said softly. There was a tinge of fatigue laced in his tone.

“I missed you too, Hukum,” I replied breathlessly as his hand was still tracing slow patterns across my skin, and his fingers brushed against the delicate chain around my waist. I arched slightly as his touch dipped lower, skimming the skin just below my navel.

His warmth and the soft sucking of his lips on mine made my eyes flutter shut as he moved closer.

“Hukum...” I breathed.

He opened his eyes and looked down at me. His gaze trailed lower, lingering on the way my chest rose and fell beneath the light fabric.

“Hmm,” he hummed, drawing delicate circles over my lower abdomen, making my nerves spark beneath his touch.

“Have you had dinner?” My voice came out uneven because of his subtle gestures.

He nodded, lifting his eyes to meet mine again.

I turned fully toward him, and he leaned in to kiss my forehead gently.

“You shouldn’t have left like that, Aishwarya,” he said quietly.

I took a shaky breath as his fingers moved towards the knot of my skirt.

My voice trembled as I spoke. “I’m sorry, Hukum... I’ll never do that again,” he said and tugged at the knot, loosening it, and slowly slipped his hand beneath the waistband.

My breath hitched, and my belly shivered beneath his touch. I blinked up at him.

“Good,” he said softly. “But I loved that you took a stand for yourself. You didn’t accept what you didn’t like.”

As his fingers found the sensitive space between my thighs, my lips parted, and I gripped the bedsheet, dropping my gaze to his shoulder; my toes curled at the sensation rippling up my spine.

“I’m so... sorry... I didn’t know... otherwise... I’ve never... Hu...kum...”

My body arched and shuddered as his fingers moved in gentle circles, teasing me.

“Yes, baby,” he murmured against my ear, and I clutched at his wrist. “You said... we’d spend time together,” he reminded me.

“Ye... yes...” I responded fervently.

“For what?” he asked, and I pressed my lips against his neck, trying to hide the moans threatening to escape. His fingers moved faster, and I clenched my eyes shut. My breathing turned audibly erratic, and small cries slipped past my lips.

“For what, Princess Aishwarya?” he whispered again.

Another wave of shivers ran through me, and I felt a wetness blooming between my thighs.

“Tell me,” he urged.

“I... I want us to, Hukum... I want us to... I mean... I want what you want,” I said in a rush, trembling under his touch. My stomach tightened. I pressed my thighs together as I could feel the pressure mounting in my lower belly, like I might pee.

But suddenly, he stopped.

He withdrew his hand and leaned back on the bed.

My eyes flew open at the sudden absence of his touch, which hit me like a crash. My body felt suspended in helpless need.

“Why???” I gasped, and my brows creased together in disbelief. I wanted to express my frustration, but the words ceased in my mouth.

“I want to sleep,” he said casually, lying back fully.

“Wh... what?” I stammered.

“I’m sleepy,” he yawned.

I stared at him, stunned, swallowing hard, unable to take my eyes off him. The heat still lingered in my body, and suddenly, I felt an overwhelming urge to touch myself.

“Why did you wake me up then?” I asked softly.

“I wanted to talk,” he replied with a faint smile.

I took a deep breath, trying to gather courage. “But... I want more than just talk,” I murmured.

He closed his eyes and replied lazily, “Like what?”

I didn’t know what had come over me, but my body was yearning to be close to him, to feel him, to be held by him.

He wrapped his arm around me and exhaled slowly, with his eyes still closed. My heart pounded nervously. I could sense that he was teasing me, testing how far I would go... if I would say it out loud.

“Like... doing that,” I whispered.

He slowly opened his eyes, and his voice dropped low as he asked, "Doing what?"

I gulped, locking eyes with him, and words stammered their way past my lips as I tried to say, "Th... that sin. You inside—"

He silenced me, suddenly crashing his lips against mine. My breath caught as our mouths met again and again, and I kissed him back with the same hunger.

Between our kisses, he murmured, "Undress."

A shockwave rolled through my body. My heart thudded wildly as I pushed my palm gently against his chest and looked into his eyes. My skin prickled with goosebumps.

"Huh?" I blinked in a daze.

"Undress and lie down," he repeated, locking his eyes onto mine with startling intensity.

Something about the way he said... his words sent a tremor deep inside me. But I couldn't look away. I could hear my heart slamming against my ribs, and my lips trembled, the way his unwavering eyes were pinned on mine.

He lay beside me, half-leaning on his elbow, just watching, without a smile or a word. And that silence churned my stomach, settling an unease so deep in my bones.

I placed my hand gently on his chest, pushing him back so he lay flat, and slowly sat up, shivering with nerves.

My heart raced, and I gulped nervously. When I glanced sideways, I found him still watching me.

Closing my eyes, I exhaled unevenly in an attempt to gather myself. With trembling hands, my fingers moved to the strings of my blouse. I could feel his gaze tracing every subtle movement. As I pulled them loose, goosebumps erupted across my arms. The blouse slid low, and I let it slip from my shoulders.

The soft light from the lamp cast a shadow of my bare self across the curtains, and I was flushed all over, but my hands didn't stop. I reached down to untie the strings of my lehenga, loosening it at my waist.

The whole time, his piercing gaze lingered on me

The sound of my bangles was the only thing breaking the hush between us.

I eased the skirt down my legs, lifting my knees, glancing at the dark complexion of my skin. Sitting there, stripped naked beside him, I felt exposed... but more than that, I was aroused, like all I wanted was the brush of his fingers against my skin, his lips trailing over my body. A slow-burning need for him unfurled within me.

I turned to him and met his gaze again. He didn't say a word, and the heat in his eyes was so intense, I had to lower my lashes.

His silence was making my knees weak and my cheeks ridiculously hot. I gulped and pushed my braid back with shaky fingers.

Inhaling deeply as I lay down beside him again, my breasts rose and fell with every shallow breath. My nipples turned stiff, perking up, and I could feel the pulsing ache between my legs just from his gaze.

He leaned closer, covering me with the comforter, and asked in a deep whisper, "Have you imagined us like this, baby?"

Butterflies fluttered violently inside me, and my lashes dipped as I answered, "A little."

His palm rested flat on my stomach, and I could feel the heat of his touch spread downward.

Pressing a kiss to my forehead, he muttered, "Elaborate."

After a brief pause, he added in a voice far heavier and deeper, "Are you sure, Aishwarya?" His thumb feathered along my navel, brushing the noisy chain confined around my waist. The tiny bells jingled faintly. "There's no going back after this," he said. "I don't want to scare you, but... I might not be able to stop. Not until I get what I want."

His words made my skin burn. "What do you want?" My voice could hardly stay steady.

"You'll know," he whispered, kissing my forehead again.

His breathing deepened with something primal, and I closed my eyes. My lips parted slightly, and I whispered, "Anything but your name from my mouth, Hukum."

He kissed my forehead again and slowly straightened up. Sitting beside me, he took my hand in his and brought it to his lips, placing a soft kiss on my knuckles while gazing into my eyes. Closing his own, he pressed my palm gently against his cheek, inhaling deeply before kissing the centre of my hand.

"I love you so much," he whispered. "I'm terrified of hurting you... and equally desperate to make love to you."

I blinked slowly, feeling my chest tighten with every word he said.

"You left me so vulnerable without you, Hukum." My voice wavered with each word I spoke. "I can't describe how intensely my body and soul missed you. Every night, lying alone on this bed... I missed your touch, your warmth, everything. Please give me all of it... Give me all of you. Erase this cruel emptiness. I don't care if it hurts. I know it will be beautiful, because it's you."

He didn't speak at first, just kissed my fingers again, and then nodded slowly.

"Do you know how to stop me?" he asked softly. "If at any point you feel uncomfortable or unsure?"

I nodded once. "Yes."

He smiled faintly and pressed another kiss to my red-inked fingertips before slowly guiding my hand above my head. His eyes never left mine as he leaned over me and gently pinned my hand there.

My heart thundered wildly, and the moment he leaned closer and pressed his wet lips at the base of my neck, I gasped harder.

His forehead pressed against my cheek as he sucked on the sensitive skin just below my ear. My head fell back involuntarily, and my lashes fluttered closed, when I felt his tongue glide over the spot he'd just marked, sending shivers

straight to my spine. My lips parted slightly as my mind raced ahead, imagining that same lick in places lower... far more sinful.

"Aishwarya," he breathed against my skin.

"Ji," I whispered, biting my lower lip, barely able to find my voice.

"Widen your legs."

Goosebumps erupted across my skin. Strange sensations flooded my mind, but as I somehow managed to part my legs slightly, the jingle of my anklets sounded much louder in the stillness. As he settled between them, my thighs opened further on instinct.

He bit just beneath my ear with sudden intensity, and his hand slid up my leg, curling it around his own thigh.

My breath caught in my throat. I felt completely exposed and utterly aroused beneath him.

His bare chest pressed against mine as his lips trailed along my jawline. My breath caught in my throat when his hips abruptly crashed against mine, and I felt his hardness.

My hand instinctively reached for his arm, but before I could touch him, he grabbed my other wrist and pinned it above my head alongside the first.

I sank into the mattress, feeling the heat of his length between my legs; it was overwhelming in the most intimidating way.

"Are you sure, baby?" he asked again.

"Yes," I whispered instantly.

I felt the curve of his smile against my cheek, and instinctively, I arched my body toward him. He bit my cheek lightly and looked into my eyes.

"Say you're the most beautiful girl in the world," he said with a mix of teasing and commanding.

I opened my eyes slowly and gazed back at him.

"I'm the only girl who has ever lain naked under you," I whispered. "Indeed, I'm the most beautiful girl in the world."

A grin flickered at his lips, and he gently cupped my cheek, holding both my wrists with one hand. His thumb brushed my lips, and I kissed it.

"My goodness," he breathed over my lips, and I leaned up, trying to kiss him, but he held me back with the pad of his thumb.

I tried again, but he only smiled, clearly enjoying the desperation in my eyes.

A soft frustration rose in me, and I bit his thumb. And in the next breath, his lips crashed onto mine in sheer desperation and aggression.

My heart nearly stopped at the way his mouth devoured mine.

My jaw stretched to match his pace, and I whimpered against his kiss, feeling his weight and warmth everywhere at once. I felt my stomach clench from the pressure of his lips sucking on mine, like he might relish them whole.

I was caged between him, with the restraint of his hand above my head, and the press of his erection against my abdomen made me feel every inch of him.

It was wild and raw, yet so gentle.

He finally pulled back, releasing my hands, only to lower his head to my shoulder. I trembled beneath him and instinctively wrapped my arms around his biceps as he kissed me there.

The heat his skin radiated felt so torturous, and with the way his chest pressed into mine, I felt dizzy with the sensation of his closeness.

His lips drifted lower, kissing along my chest, and his hand slowly cupped the outline of my breast.

I looked down at his hand engulfing my sensitive skin, then up at him, just as he lifted his gaze to meet mine.

A tremor rippled through me as his gaze dropped, and he took my nipple into his mouth. His lips were warm, causing me to draw in a sharp breath at the sensation.

As he caught hold of my breast from under and gave it a hard squeeze, it hurt, but it was the kind of pain that made me want more.

He sucked gently at first, then with more pressure, causing me to gasp, and I felt the wetness pool between my legs, driving me insane.

My eyes fluttered shut in anticipation. Without warning, he opened his mouth wider and took more of my breast into it.

It was as if my soul lifted from my body and a gasp tore through me, followed by a helpless moan.

He nipped on my nipple, and I flinched at the stinging ache, but instead of pulling away, my hands flew to his head, threading into his hair.

He looked up at me, and his wet, glistening lips curved at the side into a smirk. I blinked, biting my lip, trying not to cry out.

He moved to my other breast, and I cupped his cheek, hoping he'd go easier this time, but he didn't. He sucked, bit, and tugged harder at my nipple.

I bit my lip, holding in a whimper that was lodged at the base of my throat. I wasn't crying, but my body was overwhelmed by a kind of desperation I could barely endure.

And then... he moved lower.

He kissed his way down my abdomen, inch by inch, lingering at my navel. His lips brushed over the soft curves of my belly.

"Widen your legs, Aishwarya."

His words made my insides somersault, and I took in a sharp inhale, trying to calm my pounding heart.

The sensations rushing through my nerves left me breathless as I slowly parted my legs.

He pressed his lips over my lower abdomen, dipping further, and I squeezed my eyes shut, clenching onto the bedsheet to keep a leash on my control.

As he descended, leaving a trail of soft, featherlight kisses along the line from my abdomen to my core, I felt a

throbbing heat unfurl in my belly.

My thighs pulsed beneath the warmth of his palms, and my hand instinctively rose to my mouth, sinking my teeth into my fingers as the pressure of his mouth deepened.

With firm intensity, he parted his mouth and drew my skin into his mouth, sucking harder, like he was savouring every fold of mine. It was as if he were eating his favourite meal but not swallowing it down.

A helpless whimper spilt from my mouth when he tugged at the skin, pulling it out, leaving my thighs in a shaking mess.

Every inch of me burned under the warm wetness of his mouth, while he licked me, swirling his tongue through my slick folds, and nipping on the skin.

My breathing elevated. My stomach trembled feverishly. The tiny bells on my waist chain, anklets, and bangles chimed in a soft melody with every movement of mine.

My back arched in a sharp stretch as his mouth moved faster, and without thinking, my hand slid up to his head, threading fingers tightly into his hair.

I attempted to push him. "Pl... please..." yet I didn't know what I was pleading for.

Unfazed, he kept up the rhythm, sucking at my flesh, sometimes stretching it between his lips, and at times tracing wet laps across it.

I fought the urge to squeeze my thighs together as the sensations grew too intense to keep me grounded. He'd kissed me there before, but this time was nothing like that. It wasn't gentle or careful; it was raw, desperate, and it made me feel as if my soul slipped right out of me.

"Hukum, please..."

The sound that left my lips felt strange, like it didn't belong to me. It wasn't a cry of pain, but of yearning. Longing for what, I wasn't even sure.

Slowly, he pulled back, and I blinked at him, knitting my brows together.

Even in the dimly lit chamber, I could make out how striking his features were. The way his dark lips glistened with wetness, how unruly strands of hair fell across his forehead, and the flush of heat rising to his cheeks, turning them red. Just looking at him stirred a thousand butterflies in my stomach.

As soon as he straightened between my legs, I pressed my thighs together.

Slowly, his hands moved to his lower half, untying the knot, and my heart skipped at the sight, making my lashes fall. But desire and curiosity betrayed me, and my gaze lifted again, just in time to see him slide the fabric down.

A strong spark jolted through me, and I visibly shivered, seeing his big, hard scroll.

Gulping hard, I tried to voice my doubt, "Should I, I mean, should I tou—"

He swallowed my words midway as he leaned in and crashed his lips over mine in wild haste and need. His mouth devoured mine with unrestrained need, and the moment his bare *scroll* brushed against my thigh, I died.

It was warm and hard, yet it glided over my skin with startling softness.

While he was lost in the kiss, I attempted to move my hand to touch him, but he firmly grabbed it and pinned it beside my head with a possessive grip.

He pulled away and looked at me, shaking his head, and I blinked at him.

I blinked silently, looking into his eyes. Something about that moment felt strange. With him between my legs, closer than ever, it felt as though I was on an edge, caught between fear and thrill.

"It's grown bigger than before," I whispered.

He stroked my cheek gently, flickering his eyes between my lips and eyes lazily. His voice came out low, almost restrained as he asked, "Just an inch?"

I nodded slowly.

As his lips grazed my jaw, his hand slipped lower to my core, brushing his finger over the aching heat between my thighs, sending a trembling wave of want that swept over me.

My lips parted on a needy inhale, and I bit down on my lower lip to keep any sinful sound from escaping.

A sudden shiver ran through me, and my brows drew together as the tip of his scroll brushed my entrance.

The unfamiliar warmth made my lashes flutter, and I clutched his arms for support.

My eyes squeezed shut, and my breath hitched hard in my throat as he began to push in. A sharp, numbing pain shot through me, and a low, broken cry tore from my throat. Without meaning to, my back arched toward him, drawn by a desperate, aching need.

But he gently pressed me into the mattress, curling his hand around my neck, holding me close. His thumb brushed over my lips as he looked into my eyes.

“Does it hurt?” he asked in a whisper, yet I could clearly feel how hard his heart was pounding against mine.

I gave a slow nod, and he leaned low, placing a tender kiss on my cheek.

As he pushed deeper into me, a tremor rippled through my entire body. A cry surged up my throat, but I bit down on my lip, desperately trying to contain it.

Slowly and deeply, he began sucking at the crook of my neck with a passion that made my fingers curl tightly into the bedsheet.

“God, Aishwarya... you’re unbelievably tight. It’s insane,” he hissed breathlessly against my cheek.

I drew a shaky breath. “I’m sorry. I don’t know how not to be tight.”

Suddenly, he burst into laughter and looked at me. His eyes sparkled with happiness. There was something so infectious about the way he laughed that I couldn’t help but

laugh along, even though a piercing ache still throbbed between my legs.

He gently caressed my cheek and pressed his lips to mine, kissing me softly. The pain slowly began to dull, replaced by a growing warmth and wetness that spread through me as I melted into his arms.

“One more inch?” he asked between the kisses, and my eyes grew wide.

“Huh?”

He gently stroked my cheek, locking his eyes with mine in a deep gaze, and pushed further into me.

My body jolted from the impact, and I bit down on my lip instantly to keep from crying out.

He moved closer, grabbing my wrists and pinning them above my head. One hand slid down to cup my neck, tipping my chin up.

“I want to hear you,” he murmured. His voice was rough as he sank deeper inside me with careful intent.

My whole body ignited with heat, and I bit my lip harder as a fresh wave of pain surged through me.

“It hurts,” I whispered, and he paused for a few moments, until my breath calmed a little and then slowly thrust deeper, until I could no longer hold back my cries.

My own voice sent a tremor through me, and I felt his mouth soothe me with tender kisses on my neck.

I instinctively tried to pull my hands free, but he held them firmly, entwining his fingers with mine above my head.

I could feel all of him inside me. Every inch of my body burned with sensation.

I thought it was over, and that he would pull out, but the very next moment, my illusion shattered as he began to move inside me.

I yelped, feeling another wave of pain washing over me.

But he didn't stop. He kept moving, and I kept crying out louder. He listened, kissing me through the sobs. His

shoulders strained with each movement, and the ache in my knees turned unbearable, yet I gave in to him.

My mind felt like it was melting under the weight of the sensations crashing through me. Words clung to the back of my throat. My lashes fluttered shut, and I felt myself growing even wetter between my thighs.

I tried to wriggle my wrist free, but he only tightened his grip, and a few of my bangles snapped from the pressure; it made me shudder violently.

My eyes flew open just as he released my hand, while his hips continued to move in slow strokes. I found myself moving with him, instinctively falling into sync. My legs wrapped around his thighs, and with every shift of our bodies, my anklets chimed softly in the chamber's stillness.

"Does it still hurt?" he asked softly, kissing the tip of my nose.

I moaned, shaking my head slowly, even though the pain still lingered.

His body was slick with sweat, and I could sense his restraint, the tension he was holding back.

Suddenly, I remembered what Jiji had told me, and my fingers moved to wrap around his back, reaching for his hip.

But before I could touch him, he caught my wrist and pinned it beside my face, staring at me with stunned eyes.

"No, baby," he whispered, while keeping up a steadier pace.

"Why?" I asked breathlessly, trying to free my hand, but he tightened the grip.

"I'll lose control."

I shivered at his words, and I asked timidly, "What happens when you lose control?"

He kissed me again, brushing his lips with mine as he murmured, "It'll make you take my name."

I shook my head, dazed. "I don't think so."

I didn't even know what I was saying anymore. The pain had dulled, melting into a storm of heat and sensation.

This... this must be the pleasure Jiji spoke about.

I slid my hand out of his grip and locked eyes with him.
“Let’s see.”

He exhaled sharply as I touched his back and pulled him closer. He kissed my cheek, and I let my hand trail slowly to his hips. The moment I reached him, he thrust deeper into me.

I gasped, arching my body sharply under him.

My limbs moved in rhythm with his, and I clung to his biceps. His fingers slid into my hair, and his pace quickened.

My whole body felt ablaze, and I was on the verge of losing my mind. I couldn’t process anything; my brain was flooded with overwhelming sensations, and my cries and moans echoed through the chamber.

As his movements grew wild and raw with urgency, I cried louder.

But my voice didn’t bother him. I gripped his waist, hoping it would calm him, but he kept going.

His teeth sank into my earlobe, and suddenly, the sensations spiralled into something even wilder.

He was thrusting harder, and the ache in my knees grew unbearable.

“Hukum... please...” I moaned louder, but he kept moving with unrelenting intensity.

He lifted his face to look at me and pressed his forehead against mine, drenched in sweat.

“Do you want me to stop?” he grunted through his teeth.

I bit down on my lip, tilting my head back. “Please...”

He bit my cheek gently and murmured, “Ranvijay. Stop,” The words weren’t a command. They were instructions. “That’s how you have to beg me, Aishwarya,” he whispered, and every inch of skin came alive from the terror of it.

I whimpered, clutching his arm. “Please, please... slow... er...”

I didn’t even know what I was pleading for. My body couldn’t keep up. My stomach clenched, and I suddenly felt

like I'd burst from the intensity.

"Please... Hukum..." I moaned louder, unable to hold back. His breath felt hot against my lips as he groaned into my mouth.

Sweat beaded on my forehead, and I lost all sense of control.

"Hukum, please... Huk..... Ra... please... Ranvijay, please..." my voice came in heavy gasps, words scattered from the haze of the intensity.

Tears welled in my eyes, and he instantly cupped my cheek, kissing the trail they left, pushing more before stopping.

"Is it hurting, my baby?" he teased, his voice full of care.

I tried to steady my wildly racing heartbeat. My entire body felt like it was on fire a moment ago. My legs were trembling, fingers shaking as wave after wave of overwhelming sensation surged through me.

"Hukum... please, just..."

I looked into his eyes timidly, feeling completely out of my mind. He started moving again slowly. Each thrust pushed my limits further, as if he were tearing me apart only to stitch me back together with every retreat. My chest arched, my body lifted in sync with him as he ground into me deeply.

His lips parted slightly, and then, suddenly, he delved into me further.

I squeezed my eyes shut and tilted my head back as his fingers slid into my hair and his lips brushed over mine. Our breathing had grown ragged. I could feel the tension building in his body from the way he was moving.

"Does it hurt, Aishwarya?" he asked again.

I gave a faint shake of my head, though another silent tear escaped, tracing a path down my cheek. I felt his chest pounding against mine frantically. When I opened my eyes, he was already looking into them. The furrow between his brows deepened, and he gently wiped away a tear.

Then, he pushed in again slowly, and I felt a tremor ripple through him as much as through me. His grip on my forearm tightened, and a sharp wave of sensation surged through my body, pulling a soft whimper from my throat.

A deep cry escaped my lips before I could stop it, and I couldn't help but beg.

"Oh... Hukum, please... Ranvijay, please... I'm begging you, slower..." My lips trembled uncontrollably under the feathery brush of his, and he suddenly froze, as if he had been snapped out of a trance.

"Fuck... fuck, I'm sorry... I'm so sorry, my baby."

His eyes brimmed with concern as he pulled out instantly and gently cupped my cheek. I tried to calm my racing heart, but a few more tears rolled down my cheeks at the stinging pain. The sudden emptiness left me feeling more vulnerable.

I didn't even know why I was crying.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, Aishwarya," he whispered again, resting his forehead against mine.

I closed my eyes, letting his voice soothe me, but the storm inside hadn't settled.

"Are you okay, my baby?" he asked worriedly.

I opened my eyes slowly, stretched my legs with difficulty, and gave him a tiny nod. "Yes..."

I bit down on my lower lip as he kissed my forehead.

"I'm sorry," he whispered again and shifted aside.

I didn't understand it myself. Why had I begged him to stop? It wasn't pain, but the intensity and overwhelming sensations felt like they would consume me whole. It was terrifying, like losing control of my body, my mind. The only sensation that remained was the feeling of his skin rubbing against mine.

And yet... this emptiness gnawed at me worse than the wave. I wanted him inside me again. I didn't want to be apart.

“Hukum...” I reached out and wrapped my arm around his waist, clinging to him desperately.

He looked at me, confused.

“Please...” I whispered shakily.

He was still catching his breath. “But you asked me to... stop.”

I shook my head quickly, and with trembling fingers I tried to draw him closer. “Just once more,” I pleaded, barely knowing what I was even asking for.

He suddenly sat up, and my body trembled as he took my wrist, guiding me into his lap.

I gasped at the abrupt shift, feeling him thrust into me again.

His gaze locked onto mine as I arched instinctively, digging my nails into his biceps. His hands gripped my waist, then slid down to my hips, guiding my movements.

He began pulling me closer with each breathless roll of my hips. My eyes fluttered shut as the sensation surged again sharply.

“That’s it... you’re becoming completely mine, Aishwarya,” he murmured against my lips.

“I’m already yours, Hukum,” I whispered, barely able to form the words.

He slowly started rocking me in his lap and steadying my waist. “Move your hips like this... until I ask you to stop.”

My heartbeat raced. The rhythm he set had me taking him even deeper, our bodies pressed flush together, heat pouring from our skin. He was impossibly fast, and I could barely keep up.

“Huh?” I was breathless and dazed.

I blinked up at him as he slowly withdrew his hands, letting me take over. The moment was overwhelming. I could feel all of him as I grounded myself deeper, gasping sharply.

He leaned back on his elbows, watching me with heavy-lidded eyes. I placed my palms on his shoulder, continuing

to grind against him.

Our bodies glistened with sweat, burning hot, but there was no space left for shame, only sensations.

"That's my obedient baby," he groaned. And the way his lips parted when his head dropped back, aroused me even more.

"A little faster, Aishwarya," he commanded.

I tried, but the burning still lingered. Suddenly, he grabbed the end of my braid, wrapped it around his fist, and tugged me closer, making me lean forward over him.

"I said faster, Aishwarya," he reminded.

"I'm trying, Hukum," I gasped, trying again. Each movement was a surge of sensation.

He kissed me harder and, in between, asked, "Do you want me to finish it?"

I nodded furiously. "Yes... please..."

I didn't even know what I was begging for, only that I needed a release from the knot of desperation tightening inside me, anything to break the throbbing, wet ache pulsing between my legs.

He grabbed my arms and pulled them back, locking them together. I gasped as the sensation made me feel even wetter. Crashing his lips against mine, he bit me, making me whimper at the piercing pain.

Smirking slightly, he said, "Say, 'Ranvijay, fuck me, please,'" His words sent fire through my veins.

"I... I don't know what that means," I stammered, trembling beneath him. However, I could sense what it probably meant.

He kissed me again and whispered, "You will, baby... just beg once."

He began grinding me against him, twisting both of my hands behind my back, caging me completely. I closed my eyes and buried my face in his chest.

"Ra... Ranvijay... fuck me... please..." I breathed out shakily.

He caught my chin, lifted my face, and made me meet his eyes.

“Now repeat it,” he insisted, holding me firmly.

The proximity was unbearable. I could feel every inch of his skin against mine, his heat, his intensity... and it was all too much. I was naked, trembling, unable to meet his gaze. I had already cried in his arms, moaned his name shamelessly, but this... looking him in the eye and begging? I couldn't handle it.

And perhaps he knew, because he suddenly tightened his grip on my wrists and moved me against him, making me lose what little control I had left.

“Say it, baby... I've already heard it once.”

I gulped, trembling in his grasp, dizzy from the sensations. “Fuck me... please... Ra... Ranv... Ranvijay...”

As soon as the words left me, his grip tightened dangerously over me.

“As you command.”

And then he began grinding me harder, faster, mercilessly. My body trembled violently against his, the weight of it all pushing me deeper into him.

My stomach clenched, my nipples hardened, my breathing grew erratic, and my heartbeat thudded madly.

His strong arms caged me, and he buried his face in the base of my neck, his breath ragged as I felt him twitching inside me, nearing his release.

He let go of my hands, grabbed my waist, and lifted me slightly. He slammed me down harder against him, using my weight to push him deeper.

I died. I literally died. He thrust frantically with desperate urgency, using my body as if it weighed nothing, pushing me into madness. I was wet. I was soaking wet.

The sounds of my bangles, anklets, and waist chain echoed through the chamber like wild music, and I was on the verge of surrendering.

“Oh my God!” I cried out, unable to contain it anymore.

And just then, he tensed.

He laid me down beneath him and pinned both my hands over my head. His mouth found my jaw, and he sucked, grinding harder, ignoring my cries and moans that filled the room.

"Hukum... Oh my God!!!" I couldn't help but squeak louder. It was ridiculously, feverishly wild.

My moans kept growing louder as he pounded into me. I had no control over a single inch of my body. In that moment, it felt as if he ruled me, undoing me, turning me into a mess I never imagined I could become.

"Hukum!" I called him, over and over, as if he were the only one I could cling to.

"Urgh... Aishwarya!" he groaned against my skin, shoving himself deep into me with a sudden, brutal thrust.

My head pressed further into the mattress, and I broke into tears as I arched my back.

"Rona nahi hai Aishwarya... Dobara himmat nahi hogi." (Do not cry, Aishwarya. I won't have the courage even to come close to you again.) His voice trembled intensely in my ear. The slight fear was visible in it.

Slowly, he began moving again, and I bit my lip hard, trying not to cry. He pressed his forehead against mine. And then, he suddenly pulled out.

I felt his warmth spill against my thighs as he collapsed on me, still shaking from the release.

I sucked on my lower lip, feeling his damp, flushed body, just like mine.

As I slowly wrapped my frail arms around him, I could hear his loud heartbeat and his heavy, uneven breathing.

"Are you okay, Hukum?" I asked softly.

He kissed my cheek. "Never been this okay in my whole life, Aishwarya," he murmured tiredly.

I exhaled shakily, trying to calm my own racing heart. My fingers gently traced the curve of his biceps.

"It was... really difficult," I admitted, almost embarrassed.

He lifted his head and looked at me, and a slow smile spread across his face. "But you did it," he said, with a teasing glint in his eyes. "How does it feel?"

I looked into his eyes and bit my lip. "I don't know," I murmured. "My knees and spine ache. And... It's sore there, too."

His smile faded into concern. He gently moved off me and gathered me carefully into his arms. "Aww, I'm so sorry, baby," he whispered, settling my head against his still-pounding chest.

I closed my eyes, sinking into his warmth.

"You've turned me into a mess, Hukum," I said softly. "Moni will have to work overtime just to comb my hair. And you broke my bangles... they were special."

He caressed my head gently. "Really?" His voice was softer, laced with sleep.

I tilted my head up.

"Are you sleepy?" I asked.

He inhaled deeply and shook his head, but I could see in his eyes that he was struggling to stay awake.

"Don't you dare fall asleep, Hukum," I warned, narrowing my eyes. "You disturbed my sleep. Now I can't even rest. And my legs are killing me."

He chuckled and sat up, pulling the comforter over me, tucking it up to my chest.

"I'm all sticky and dirty," I mumbled. "I need a bath, Hukum."

Without a word, he clapped twice.

My eyes widened in shock. "I'm naked. You're naked. We're naked," I hissed, hiding my face in his chest, but he let out a small laugh.

A moment later, an attendant entered the chamber quietly. "Please bring warm water for bathing," he said calmly.

"Ji, Hukum," she replied and slipped out swiftly.

I groaned and hid deeper in his chest.

He chuckled, then whispered near my ear, "You called me Ranvijay... five times."

I bit my lip and slowly looked up at him.

Leaning close to his mouth, I whispered, brushing my lips against his, "I love you, Prince Ranvijay Dev Singh,"

He shifted beneath me with a deep chuckle and kissed me back.

"I love you too, Princess Aishwarya Ranvijay Dev Singh," he murmured. "I love all of you. The innocent, the intelligent, the timid, the fiery, the demanding. Every single shade of you. You're mine, baby. All mine."

I giggled softly. "Don't get your hopes too high, Hukum. This was the last time I crossed my limit."

He bit my lip gently, making me yelp.

"We'll see, baby," he grinned mischievously. "We'll see."



Once the attendant left after informing us about the warm water, he pushed the comforter away, and I shifted aside to let him stand. He wrapped a cotton towel around his waist, while I draped my dupatta around myself.

Smiling, he suddenly swept me into his arms.

I giggled, shyly hiding my face in his chest as he carried me toward the bathing room.

"It's past midnight, and we're still awake. You'll be late for your work tomorrow," I murmured, drawing small circles on his chest.

"I'm free for the next two days. Bhai-sa granted me a little rest," he said, and I glanced up at him with a small smile.

He gently set me down on the edge of the pool and sat beside me, checking the water's temperature. The attendant must've drawn a few buckets of cold water and mixed in boiling water to warm it just right.

I watched him silently as he dipped his hand in the pool, then suddenly, he splashed a wave of water right into my

face.

My eyes widened in surprise, and he chuckled.

“Hukum!” I laughed, wiping my face as he slid into the pool. Grinning, he caught my forearm and dragged me in, settling me in his lap.

I hesitated at first, but when he wrapped his arms around me so lovingly, I melted into his chest and rested my head on his shoulder. He nuzzled my cheek gently, and I closed my eyes, soothed by his touch.

A soft kiss brushed my cheek as he whispered my name, “Aishwarya.”

I inhaled deeply at the huskiness in his voice and hummed, “Ji?”

His fingers slowly glided down my arms, brushing against the bangles as he spoke.

“Are you okay? Did it hurt too much?” he asked in a tender, concerned tone.

I opened my eyes and met his gaze. Our faces were just inches apart. His concern made my heart ache, and I shook my head gently.

“Not the kind of pain I expected... but perhaps the kind I’ll crave for the rest of my life,” I whispered.

A smile broke across his face. I bit my lower lip, feeling the warmth blooming between us.

He stared at me, moving his gaze between my eyes and lips. I reached up, cupping his cheek, and he gently held my wrist before leaning in. My breath hitched as he kissed me at a slow pace, sucking my lower lip passionately. The pull was so intense; I was breathless within moments.

As my chest rose with hurried breaths, I pulled away, but his hand slid from my wrist to the back of my neck, holding me in place.

“You are the sweetest fruit of patience one could ever earn, Aishwarya. Men die for fair, beautiful women, never knowing the intoxication a woman like you holds. With every moan, I’ve felt a part of Ranvijay melt inside me. You’ve

shown me a version of myself I didn't know existed. I've never even imagined being this close to a woman... but with you, I want to test every limit. I want to break every ounce of your patience, Aishwarya," he breathed over my lips, his brows furrowed as he spoke, and goosebumps ran down my arms. My heart pounded, and I surrendered myself completely.

"And you're the man every Aishwarya deserves, Hukum," I whispered before he kissed me again.

As he tilted my head back, he murmured against my lips, "Before our marriage, I used to wonder if I'd ever be able to open up to you. I didn't know how we'd live together, how we'd even begin. But the moment I met you, all my fears and insecurities faded. The way you fit into my life... no one else could've done it. Your eyes pull me in. Your smile makes me forget the world. Your voice feels like home, my baby. I never craved home before, because no one ever waited for me. But in every moment of the past two months, I was dying to return to hold you in my arms."

He groaned softly into my mouth, and I felt a wet ache between my thighs.

"Before marriage, I feared responsibilities. But now... now I want all of you," he murmured, tightening his hold around my neck. "I want to ruin every inch of you, Aishwarya. I want to know you completely. Everything you know, and everything you've yet to discover."

He bit down on my lower lip, pulling it between his teeth, making me gasp at the sharpness. He released it with a gentle pop.

"I want more of your sighs... your moans... your hisses, Aishwarya," he whispered, moving his other hand to untangle my damp dupatta from where it clung to my chest.

I let out a soft sigh as his palm trailed down from my chest to my core. My thighs instinctively pressed together, but he leaned into my ear.

"Let me feel you again, Aishwarya."

His words twisted in my stomach. I shivered when he parted my legs and guided himself behind me. My body arched like a crescent moon against his. As his fingers wrapped around my neck, I felt the tip of his arousal brush against my core.

"Think you can take it, baby?" he asked.

I was trembling, overwhelmed by the nearness once more. My lips quivered, but I still whispered, "Yes..."

He glided his hardness along my folds. My nipples hardened painfully, and I clung to both his wrists desperately.

"My back... it's hurting, Hukum..." I tried to say, but his grip only firmed at my neck as he whispered into my ear.

"Push down on me. Sit on me, baby. Take it all."

His hoarse voice stilled the words in my throat, and I tried to shake my head.

"I can't... it feels so big... and... it burns..." Words tumbled past my lips in broken gasps, consumed by the sensations.

I could feel the burning sensation erupting in my core as his hardness rubbed against the inside of my walls. My entire body trembled under his hold as he slowly made me take him in completely. I felt its tip touch something deep inside me that brought a strange mix of uneasiness and slight pain.

"Very good," he muttered, and I breathed heavily.

"Hukum... why again?" I exhaled deeply, wondering if it was right.

He held the back of my hand and guided my fingers to my core.

"You'll love it, baby. Should I stop?" he murmured in my ear.

He moved my fingers over that sensitive skin, and my whole body shivered from the blend of unease and pleasure crashing through me.

"No... I want to feel more, too," I whispered, my breathing had turned uneven and ragged.

He bit down on my ear, making me jolt and whimper with the sudden pain.

"I want you to feel all of me, baby," he growled softly in my ear.

My eyes rolled back. "I did... I took all of you a while ago..." I gasped.

He sucked gently on my ear before letting his hand replace mine, caressing my skin in circles while his hardness rested deep inside me, like it belonged there.

"That wasn't even half of it, my Aishwarya."

His words sent a sharp shiver down my spine. My hips began to move in sync with his fingers, executing slow, circular motions. I was moving over his hardness and could feel how good it made him feel.

"You're driving me insane, Hukum. I'll die... this is too much," my voice broke with every breath.

He bit the base of my neck and whispered with restraint, "Please, baby... just a little more. Please... or I'll die. Or should I stop?"

His voice sent goosebumps rippling across my body. Suddenly, he withdrew from my neck, and I instinctively placed my hands on his legs to balance myself. With my legs parted, I sat on his lap. His hardness was buried deep inside me. My knees rested on either side of his thighs, and my back arched against his chest.

"Ohhh... It's getting easier," I moaned.

I tried pressing my thighs together, but it felt impossible. Strange, pulsing sensations were spreading through me. I turned my head slightly and saw him resting his head back against the pool wall, biting his lower lip as he stared at my bare back.

My lower body moved in sync with his. I didn't even know how.

"Make me release for you, Aishwarya. Please... I want you to find your pace, baby," he groaned.

I furrowed my brows. The absence of his touch on my core made me feel even more desperate. Yet, I was grinding against him hungrily.

It felt like I was hanging by a fragile thread, not knowing whether I should hold on to it... or die.

He spread his arms wide along the edge of the pool, relaxing as if surrendering himself to me. I bit down on my lower lip.

"I can't..." I tried to speak, but the sensations were too intense.

He leaned forward and kissed my nape, and the movement sent another deep wave of pleasure crashing through me.

"You wanted to make it up to me, right?" he asked.

I nodded quickly, gasping, "Ye... yes..."

He sat upright again. "Then earn it, baby. Make your husband release. Please us, Aishwarya."

His words made my cheeks burn. The water was soothing, but his words made me feel filthy in the most sinful way.

I felt his palm slide down my back, from the nape to the small of my spine. His fingers slid the loose strands of hair away from my cheek.

"How? I don't know how to do that... Hukum, please tell me," I pleaded in a breathless whisper.

His hardness was consuming me, killing me slowly. Even my bones felt like they were humming with sparks.

"Like this," he said, holding both sides of my waist and pulling me back and forth against him. I could feel him deep inside me. The slightest movement ignited a fire within, and I moaned uncontrollably.

Once he let go, I struggled to maintain my balance in that position.

"It's too much, Hukum..." I tried to protest, but he interrupted gently. "Should we stop?"

His words sent wild sensations spiralling through me. This commanding, raw side of him weakened my knees, drained

my strength, and yet... I shook my head. My eyes fluttered shut.

Overwhelmed and shy in that moment, I began grinding my hips against him, slowly, back and forth. My mouth spilt moans that weren't painful, just desperate and dry. It took me every ounce of energy to move against him. But his heavy breathing told me he was loving it.

"Yes, baby... keep going," he urged.

His voice sent a surge of heat through my body. I pushed myself back harder, desperate to feel him even deeper, and cried out shamelessly.

It felt dangerously good.

Oh my God... What's happening to me?

I parted my lips with a gasp, arching my head back as I leaned forward, resting my hands on his thighs while I knelt between his slightly parted legs on the pool floor.

I was wet and trembling.

"Come on, baby... do it again," he groaned again.

I bit my lower lip, lifted myself slightly, and sat back on him again. The feel of his hardness rubbing against my skin was dizzying... sinfully pleasing.

"Yes... just like that," he whispered.

I could feel my nipples hardening. My whole body responded, surrendering to this rhythm. It wasn't just my body; it was my soul that felt content.

And this time, even before he could ask, I moved again shamelessly, because I needed it.

"Yes... keep going, Aishwarya," His voice filled me with strength, but his hardness inside me was draining every ounce away. I bit down on my lower lip and moved, finding a rhythm, even as my thighs ached. The pain was unbearable, but it was worth it.

I didn't know what this was doing to me, only that it felt immensely good.

"Hukum..." I cried breathlessly as I felt him twitch deep inside me. The sensation made my entire body flinch.

“Very good... keep going, my love. I’m loving it... are you?” His voice turned unbearably hot, driving me wild. Weakness pulsed through my limbs, but I still moved, desperate to please him.

“Yes... Yes, it feels good. I don’t know why,” my voice trembled with each word as I confessed between ragged breaths.

The water around us was cooling, and the candle flames had dimmed... but the sensations inside me were only burning brighter.

In the pool’s stillness, my skin glistened with sweat. I had no idea how many times that warm liquid had spilt from me, but in that moment, nothing else seemed to matter.

His voice, filled with hunger and praise, was enough to unravel me all over again.

His guttural groans sent jolts through my spine, and I shivered with the raw intensity of it.

After that release, movement became difficult again. I felt myself clench tightly around him, but I didn’t stop. I couldn’t. As I continued, it got easier.

I didn’t know why, but I liked it. It felt as though he was giving me time to fall in love with it, to want it, to crave it.

“Should I stop, Baby?” he asked, placing his hands on either side of my waist. I couldn’t stop myself from guiding his hand to my bosom.

He leaned closer, cupping my breasts with a slow, reverent touch. His palms kneaded them gently.

“No...” I moaned, arching my body more into him. I felt his warm chest press against my back as his hand slid from my breasts up to my neck, while the other found its way between my thighs, stroking my core, teasing it slowly, making me melt.

Then, without warning, he shifted to his knees and slowly pushed into me from behind.

My head dropped back onto his shoulder, and my body trembled from the sheer force of the pleasure.

His breath was hot in my ear, and I kept grinding against him as he moved with a steady rhythm.

"Yes.. Aishwarya... I'm close, please don't stop... please..." he begged, and just hearing him unravel made another wave rush through me. My body weakened, but I gripped his wrist and kept grinding.

It felt like our bodies were speaking in a language only they understood. He held me suspended as if I weighed nothing.

His groans filled my ears as his grip on my neck tightened. His fingers worked my core in slow, dizzying circles, making me press my thighs tightly against him.

"Please, Hukum, release now, please...." I cried out desperately.

He bit my ear. "Don't stop, baby. Please..." he groaned again, and I whimpered.

"Yes... I can't take it anymore..."

I felt his breath catch against my ear, and the moment the words left my lips, he pulled out and set me down beside him. I watched as he arched his head back and groaned with a guttural pause.

"Fuck..." he growled, and I held his wrist tighter.

"Are you okay, Hukum?"

"Yes," he breathed, still lost in the moment.

Something about the way he looked twisted something inside me. My voice dropped into a whisper as I asked again, "Are you okay?"

Suddenly, he stepped out of the water and sat down at the edge of the pool, turning his head to the side. I followed his gaze and saw him grasping his length, stroking it with raw urgency.

Just watching him made my body go numb. A strange weakness spread through me.

His cheeks flushed red, veins visible on his arms, and I couldn't stop shamelessly watching him pleasure himself

until he grabbed a towel and groaned again, releasing onto it.

I didn't know why, but in that moment, he looked even more beautiful to me.

As he leaned back against the pool wall, his chest rose and fell with ragged breathing. I reached for his cheek and caressed it softly. He inhaled deeply, then turned his head and kissed my fingers.

"Oh my baby," he whispered, "you've ruined me... so bad. What would I do without you now?"

His words brought a spark of strength back to me. I smiled, just a little.

We didn't speak a word after that.

He lifted me out of the pool and helped me rinse off using the clean water kept in another vessel. It was freezing enough to make me shiver differently.

After the quick bath, he helped me slip into my nightgown. My limbs felt heavy with sleep. He smiled softly at the sight.

Scooping me into his arms again, he carried me back to bed and lay beside me.

"I love you, Aishwarya. I'm sorry if I hurt you," he whispered into my ear.

"You didn't know. Jiji had already warned me about it," I replied in a murmur.

He kissed the shell of my ear and muttered, "No more sharing of our private moments, baby."

I frowned slightly, "Why?"

He tucked me gently under his arm, stroking my cheek. "Because she's my Bhabhi-sa. A mother figure. Or at least, don't bring her into our intimate conversations. It's not good."

I nodded faintly. "Okay."

A sudden chill settled over me, and I instinctively nestled closer to him under the comforter. Wrapped in his warmth, I didn't even realise when sleep finally claimed me.



A soft jingling of anklets and rustling footsteps stirred me awake.

I stretched, blinking slowly as the morning light peeked in through the parted bed curtains. Attendants were bustling around, tying the curtains to the bedposts. I turned instinctively to the other side of the bed to find it empty. No wonder they'd entered.

"Good morning, Princess," Moni greeted sweetly.

"Good morning," I murmured groggily.

The faded sounds of clinking vessels and whispers surrounded me. As I shifted to sit up, a sudden ache rippled through my lower belly, making me wince aloud, glancing at the empty side of the bed again.

My gaze dropped to the broken shards of red bangles on the sheet, and an involuntary smile touched my lips.

"Moni, Hukum kahaan hain?" (Moni, where is Hukum?) I asked softly.

She blushed, smiling widely as the other girls began whispering and giggling among themselves.

"I don't know, Princess. Do you want help with your bath?"

I shook my head lazily, just as a sneeze escaped me.

The room burst into gentle ripples of laughter, and I couldn't help blushing.

"Lagta hai aapko thand lag gayi hai," (It seems you've caught a cold.) Moni said teasingly.

I stretched again but froze when a twinge of pain shot up my spine. Despite it all, an unfamiliar joy buzzed through me. Memories of the previous night were still hazy in my mind, yet vivid enough to colour everything with a glow.

My eyes fell on a faint stain on the bedsheet.

Blood?

I panicked for a moment. Was it menstruation? But my cycle had just ended twelve days ago...

Just then, a familiar voice interrupted my thoughts.

“Privacy.”

I turned toward the sound. He stood in the doorway, dressed in crisp white. The attendants immediately scurried out.

He walked over and sat on the edge of the bed, checking me with concern.

“How are you feeling?”

“Good... but sore,” I admitted shyly.

His lips curled in a soft smile as he leaned closer to my feet. “I’m sorry if I hurt you last night.”

Before he could kiss them, I playfully nudged his cheek with my toe. He chuckled, catching my foot and pressing a gentle kiss to it.

“I’m really sorry, Aishwarya.”

I bit my lower lip, tugging my feet back quickly. “You don’t look sorry.”

“And you don’t look hurt,” he teased, inching closer.

“I am hurt! My body’s aching, and... my core,” I said timidly.

He gently pulled me into his arms and pressed a kiss to my forehead. As he held me close, the hazy memories from the night came flooding back, and I hid my face in his chest.

“You’re really bad, Hukum,” I mumbled.

“Aww, my baby. I’m sorry,” he whispered again.

“No, you’re not,” I said, looking up at him.

He kissed my forehead and met my eyes. “Eight are left, baby.”

I frowned. “What?”

“You kissed me ten times when I was upset last time,” he said, smirking. “I’m upset now.”

I immediately pushed him back. “That’s cheating! That was different!” I argued.

He laughed lightly. “Get ready, finish your work, and meet me in the library.”

“No more Hukum, please,” I murmured.

He leaned down, brushing his lips over mine. "I'm starving for you, Aishwarya. I want to drink in every drop of you. After tasting you, I can't stop craving more. I couldn't sleep last night. I just watched you, needing to feel you again, to hear you more. I'm losing my mind, baby... please."

I nudged him. "Get a grip, Hukum. You sound like a starved little boy."

He burst into laughter. **"Aap to humari boli bolne lagin,"** (Looks like you've started speaking my language.)

Catching my wrist, he whispered, "Please, baby. I'm begging you."

"Hukum," I immediately melted, hugging him. "Never beg me, please."

Tears welled in my eyes, and he carried me in his arms again.

"Come. Let me take care of my wife today."

"So that you can make me take care of you later?" I quipped.

He arched his brow playfully. **"Ye Bhabhi-sa ne kya paath padhaya hai meri bholi si Aishwarya ko?"** (What lesson has Bhabhi-sa taught to my innocent Aishwarya?)

I laughed as he took me to the bathroom again. We spent a long time there, laughing, talking, and sharing stories from the past two months. He never missed a chance to kiss my forehead, cheeks, and lips with soft affection.

Later, we moved to the dressing room.

"Should I wear brown today?" I asked, wrapped in a towel.

He raised his brows. "So I can eat you?"

I giggled and swatted at him.

"Stop!"

Standing in front of the mirror, with damp hair cascading, I giggled like a child. It all felt magical.

"Do you remember your early days, Aishwarya?"

"Yes. I was afraid you wouldn't like me," I said softly, catching his eyes fixed on my chest.

I turned toward him and smiled. He leaned forward and captured my nipple with his lips. I braced against the dressing table, watching him suck me through the mirror.

“One, two, three... enough!” I tried to say as he playfully bit me.

He pressed his mouth firmly to my bud, shaking his head. I cupped his cheek and slid his hair falling over his forehead.

“I didn’t know husbands did this. I thought it was only for babies.”

He shifted to the other nipple and chuckled. “Everything is mine until our baby comes.”

“Enough,” I said, turning to put on my blouse.

He kissed my hip, then bit me.

“Hukum! I’ll complain about you!”

“To whom?” he challenged.

“To Jiji! She’ll tell Ranaji. He’ll scold you!”

He straightened and helped me tie my blouse.

“Fine. I’ll also tell Bhabhi-sa you begged me to do it.”

Agape, I squeaked, “When!?”

He smirked and mimicked in a thick voice, “Ranvijay... fuck me, please...”

I gasped. “No! You made me say it! Please don’t tell anyone, please!” I pleaded.

He grinned. “Aww, my baby...”

My cheeks flushed, and I bit my lip as he finished tying the strings of my blouse.



34 Ranvijay

Home.

She was my home.

The one you return to after tiring, endless journeys. One that offers peace after storms. A home you crave even when you stand amidst breathtaking views.

My eyes lingered on her glowing, radiant face in the mirror. I still couldn't quite believe how much my baby had changed.

A faint smile tugged at my lips as I remembered how timid, uncomfortable, and socially awkward she had been in the beginning. She was hesitant even to let me see her angelic face. And now... she stood bare before me without the slightest flicker of hesitation.

As I worked on the strings of her blouse, she smiled at me through the mirror.

"You're not going to the court today?" she asked, leaning forward to grab her skirt and begin fastening it.

I didn't know why, but I wanted more of her. She had been the sugar I had always deprived myself of, yet I realised I had begun to hate the taste of salt.

"Only if you want a break from me," I said lightly, watching her tie the knot of her skirt. The urge to touch her was irresistible, and giving in to it, I dipped low and pressed my lips to her nape. Her scent was maddeningly sweet.

She giggled softly, trying to wriggle out of my hold. "There's a meeting with the distributors today. I have to be present there."

I smiled against her skin and let my lips linger, sucking a little harder until she whimpered in pain and spun around to push me away.

I chuckled. "When will you be free?"

She shook her head, swallowing slowly. "It's hurting... down there. I don't want more."

"As you say, Princess Aishwarya," I murmured.

But then she surprised me, taking a step forward and wrapping her arms around me, resting her head against my chest.

"Thank you for believing in me, Hukum. I never thought I'd be able to do this," she whispered.

I immediately wrapped my arms around her, gently caressing her head. "I didn't do anything. I only shifted your focus from your negatives to your positives."

She kissed my chest lovingly. "Every girl deserves a husband like you, Hukum."

I cupped her cheek, making her look up at me. "Do you want to know about my childhood?"

She nodded.

Smiling, I sat down on the chair and pulled her into my lap. My hand caressed her cheek as I began.

"You know... growing up, I had a hard time studying and writing."

"What?" she exclaimed in disbelief.

I chuckled. "Yes."

"I was very young when both our parents died," I continued. "I didn't feel much for my father, because he mostly cared about Bhai-sa. But my mother... she loved me more than anyone. Or at least, I think so. I was too young to know for certain. I don't even remember much of her face now. But I remember how she spoiled me. I would always, always sleep beside her, eat from her hands, and listen only to her voice. She was my whole world. And when she died... I felt like I died too," I paused, inhaling heavily.

My voice softened as I started again. "Suddenly, I wasn't hungry anymore. I stopped speaking. I stopped listening. People tried to cheer me, but nothing worked. Finally, Maasima enrolled me in the Gurukul. That's where I met Guruji,"

I released a breathy sigh before speaking again. "He tried teaching me, but my inner noise was so loud, I couldn't hear his words. I struggled for five, maybe six years, unable to read or write. Even speaking became difficult. Bhai-sa began to worry, and that only made me feel more vulnerable."

I paused, inhaling deeply at the memory. She cupped my cheek warmly, with understanding.

"Then?" she asked.

I swallowed, forcing my voice steady. "Guruji didn't give up on me. He continued speaking softly, continuing to teach me. And slowly, as my inner storm calmed, his words started to reach me,"

My gaze drifted for a moment, caught in the memory. "I didn't even realise when the letters and sounds began to make sense. It was then I understood... there's an Aishwarya in all of us. The form may differ, but she exists as an insecurity, a fear. And there's a Ranvijay in all of us, too, as an inner or outer voice that can help us fight those fears. You don't always need to find a Ranvijay outside; sometimes, that strength is already inside you."

My voice dropped to almost a whisper. "And one day... none of it will matter. Not fear, not failure, nothing. One day, it simply won't matter at all."

She smiled softly. "I didn't know that. I thought my Hukum had always been this intelligent and hardworking."

Her hand caressed my cheek again, and I couldn't help but pull her closer.

"No, Aishwarya," I said softly. "Whatever I am today is because of Guruji and Bhai-sa, who never lost faith in me, no matter how late I started. They showed me what I was capable of. And you...you're a thousand times more capable than I ever was. You're born to inspire, to set an example."

She shook her head with a little laugh. "No... I was born just for you. You know, I always wondered if God wanted to give me a lonely, painful life, why bring me here before

sending me to hell? But when you came... I realised I was meant for heaven."

"Heaven, hmm? So my princess has seen stars in the closed chamber?"

She giggled. "Not just stars... more."

"Care to explain, love?" I asked.

She looked into my eyes. "I felt my heart pounding. I saw what it was to have my mind emptied of thought. I realised that the ache in my body all the time I spent in your presence wasn't sickness, it was a craving. I learned how loud I could scream and heard my own voice for the first time. And I discovered that there's pleasure from pain... but only if you surrender to the pain instead of fighting it."

I smiled. "My baby sounds... satisfied."

She bit her lip, and every time she did that, I wanted to devour her.

"Do you feel happy?" she suddenly asked. "Was I able to satisfy you?"

I narrowed my eyes slightly. "Who told you that you have to satisfy me?"

She blinked. "I don't have to?"

"Only if you want to," I replied with a smile.

"I do," she answered almost immediately. "I want to meet all of your needs. Tell me, what's next?"

I chuckled, pulling her into a warm embrace. "Next... my baby rests. And then, her work."

Her eyes lit up, and she jumped off my lap, "Yes! I've got it!"

"What?" I asked, bemused.

She grinned, leaning in to kiss me quickly. "I know how to boost the sales!" She turned to the mirror.

"How?"

But she called out for Moni.

I frowned, pulling a cloth over myself. "Aishwarya... I'm half naked."

Moni entered, looking slightly startled.

"Hurry, do my hair quickly," Aishwarya said.

"What? You called her to do your hair while I'm sitting right here?"

Her eyebrows knitted together. "You don't know how to do hair," she said matter-of-factly.

Moni began combing her long, wet strands.

Why, for God's sake, is Moni always between us?

I couldn't help muttering, "Sometimes I think you married Moni, not me."

"Don't say that, Hukum," she said, and I glanced at Moni combing her hair.

"You know, I should be the one combing your hair," I blurted out, unable to stop myself.

She turned to me in surprise. "No... why?" she asked with a slight chuckle, then instructed Moni about something.

"Princess, I should bring oil for your hair. They're quite tangled," Moni said, and I smiled at her words.

Aishwarya exhaled in frustration, though a faint smile curved her lips as she looked at me.

For a few moments, there was silence. Then, suddenly, she said to Moni, "Just bring me some scissors. They're unnecessarily long."

My eyes widened in shock. I shot up from the chair, staring at her. "Are you mad? No!!!"

"You love them?" Aishwarya asked, and I answered instantly, "Of course, they're beautiful."

She smiled, crossing her arms, and looked at Moni. "Go, grab the scissors and the oil too."

Moni nodded and walked away, but I caught Aishwarya's arm, making her face me. "No. I will never forgive you if you try to do that. I'll hate you for sure, Aishwarya."

She met my gaze. "If you love them so much, then why didn't you care about them last night? You knowingly tangled them this badly," she said, pouting.

I saw Moni returning with a pair of scissors and the oil in her hands. Looking at her, I said firmly, "Moni, leave us

alone.”

She looked at me in confusion, and Aishwarya said, “Hukum, I will get late.”

I shook my head, immediately taking the scissors and oil from her. “Moni, you leave.”

Moni lowered her gaze and walked away.

Aishwarya took the scissors back from my hand. “You need a haircut, Hukum.”

I raised my brows, but let her push me down into the chair, settling herself in my lap.

“Yes, your hair keeps falling into your eyes,” she murmured, combing her fingers through my wet locks.

“So, you brought the scissors for me?” I asked.

She nodded. “Yes.”

Leaning forward, she pressed a soft kiss to my forehead. “Should I?” she asked.

I smiled and kissed her nose. “Whatever you want, Princess.”

She smiled back, trimming my hair with slow precision and carefully setting each fallen strand aside.

“How did you learn that?” I asked quietly.

“I used to trim my father’s hair and moustache,” she replied.

“Oh,” I murmured, before slipping my arm around her waist, pulling her closer, and cupping her delicate bosom. She gasped, and I couldn’t resist brushing my teeth over her erect nipple.

“Hukum,” she squealed, scrambling to stand from my lap.

“Fourth one?” I teased.

She shook her head quickly. “No, it’s burning.”

I rose from the chair and stepped toward her. “It won’t hurt much. I promise I’ll be gentle.”

She backed until the table pressed against her, and she put her hand on my chest. “The attendants are working and cleaning our bedroom,” she said, locking her eyes with mine.

I leaned in, hovering over her lips. “I don’t need a bed to take you, Aishwarya. I just want you... and your moans in my ear.”



35 Aishwarya

My eyes widened at his words, and I pushed him away immediately.

“No more,” I shook my head.

He chuckled, cupping my cheek, and leaned closer to press a playful, lingering kiss to it, making me giggle.

“As you command, Princess.” His words stirred butterflies in my stomach, and I slowly pushed him away again.

He leaned back in the chair, caught my wrist, and kissed the back of my hand. “How long will it take?” he asked.

I inhaled deeply, trying to think, but when I saw the slight sadness on his face, I couldn’t help but chuckle.

“Even if it ends soon, we are not doing it again,” I said.

He nodded with a faint smirk. “Okay, Aishwarya.”

I bit my lower lip. I didn’t know why, but he looked even more charming and content.

Suddenly, he said, “By the way, you have beautiful handwriting, Princess.”

Warmth rushed to my cheeks. I stepped closer, shaking my head slightly. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to hurt you, Hukum. I was just... hurt,” I murmured.

He chuckled, pulling me close. I sat on his thigh, looking at him as his fingers caressed my cheek.

“I am proud of you. I’m not hurt. Even if you try to pierce my heart with a sword, I’ll not be hurt. You believed in me, you tried to change yourself for me... and I would gladly fall to my knees if you ever wished to change me for you. Even if you had yelled at me, struck me, or done anything else, I would still be proud of you. Because my wife is my purest goddess. You are my **Saraswati**, my **Lakshmi**, and my **Kaali**. You have every right to get upset with me if I am wrong. But never try to leave the palace after sunset or before sunrise... and learn to fence too,” he said.

I chuckled at the last part, shaking my head in amusement. "I think I'm too weak for fencing. If I tried to lift a sword, I might cut you."

"I'll offer my head if you need it for practice, Aishwarya," he said.

I looked at him with a straight face. "How can you even say this?"

"I'm not just saying it; if you want, I can do it," he replied.

I couldn't stop myself from gently slapping his cheek and breaking eye contact. "You're not my Hukum. He never behaves like this."

Standing up from his lap, I picked up a comb. "Let me help," he said, rising.

"Ye aapka kaarya nahi hai, Hukum," (This is not your work, Hukum.) I said, meeting his eyes. "So if you leave, Moni can help me get dressed quickly," I added.

He took the comb from my hand and kissed my head gently. "I should pay for my deeds. Why involve Moni? And you know what, I hate her. She's constantly created problems between us. Once, when she had to convince you about something, she let you go back to Songarh."

"She didn't know," I defended politely.

Turning me back toward the mirror, he gathered a section of my hair and began combing gently.

"Why do you love her so much?" he asked with a displeased expression.

"Because she stays with me when you're not here. She slept beside me these past two months while you were away," I replied.

A small smile curved his lips. "Oh, she slept with you."

The memory of last night suddenly flashed in my mind, and I lowered my gaze. "Hukum, I saw a little blood on the bedsheet. I hope it's not concerning," I asked in a low voice.

He met my gaze through the mirror. "I hope it's not hurting? Soreness is expected," he said in a concerned tone.

I focused on my lower abdomen before shaking my head. "No, not painful... but slightly burning."

"It's fine then. Usually, girls bleed during their first time," he said, still combing my hair.

"Hukum... did you also feel pain?" I asked quietly.

He smiled faintly. "A little, in the beginning. You're tight, baby."

"I shouldn't be?" I frowned slightly.

"No, you're perfect. Custom-made by God for me, just as I love and always wanted," he said, pressing a kiss to the side of my head.

"Okay, I should braid them now," I said, moving my hand back, but he looked at me through the mirror.

"Why were you sleeping in the courtyard last night?" he asked suddenly.

I recalled he had carried me to the bedroom. "Ah... why did you take me to the bedchamber? I wanted to sleep in the courtyard."

"You could have died, Aishwarya," he said.

"But I didn't. I would've perfectly survived that," I countered, making him smile as he began putting on my jewellery.

"Seems like someone is liking the taste of sex," he teased.

Heat rushed to my cheeks, and I shook my head quickly. "No... no, I'm just saying because you were enjoying it a lot."

"And you didn't?" he asked.

I met his intense gaze in the mirror, then nodded slightly. "I did too... a little."

He clicked his tongue. "Alright, then you'll have to ask me when you want to do it again."

"What? Why?" I frowned.

"Because I want you to enjoy it, baby. I want you to enjoy riding me... or me taking you," he said, drawing out the last words in a teasing tone.

I bit my lower lip as the memory of my cries the previous night flooded back, and turned to face him, placing the dupatta over my head.

"Alright, I have to go," I said, trying to walk past him, but he caught my gaze.

"I brought you a lot of gifts, Aishwarya," he said, and my eyes widened in amazement.

"Gifts!" I squealed with joy.

He clapped twice, calling for an attendant. "Can you bring those inside?" he asked her.

I couldn't help but hug him tightly, and he caressed my head. "That's it. I just wanted a happy Aishwarya. There are no gifts," he teased. I immediately pulled back to look at him. "Joking," he added, walking over to grab his attire for the day.

Before the attendants returned, he dressed quickly. Then, I saw them coming in, carrying large plates draped in red velvet.

"Keep them here," he instructed, pointing to the table.

Once they placed the plates down, he told them to leave, and I waited until we were alone again.

"All yours, baby," he said.

Biting my lower lip, I walked towards the plates. Pulling the cloth from the first one, I found a heavy pair of anklets with multiple colours and tiny bells. My eyes lit up.

"Oh my goodness, they're so beautiful!" I squealed, glancing at him.

He smiled, rubbing his chin with his index finger. "I love to hear you walking around me all the time," he uttered, making me feel shy.

I moved on to the following plates and found exquisite dresses, jewellery, books, and even a new pen with an inkpot. Finally, I reached the last one.

When I lifted the velvet, my brows furrowed in confusion. "Who are they?"

It was a huge portrait of a dark-complexioned woman holding a newborn baby with curly hair.

Leaning closer, I swallowed hard. "Is that me and my..." My voice trailed off as tears welled up in my eyes.

He nodded. "Yes, your mother."

Tears rolled down my cheeks as I touched the freshly painted portrait. "But... how did you get it?"

"Your father helped me have it drawn," he said.

I broke into sobs. He came up behind me, wrapping his arms around me, and rested his chin on my head as I stared at her angelic eyes and sweet smile.

"She is beautiful," I whispered, then turned to bury myself in his embrace. "Thank you so much, Hukum. I love you so much... thank you," I said in a trembling voice.

He turned me slightly towards the portrait. "See, Aishwarya... she is immensely proud of you. Look into her eyes. She might not have given birth to a son, but she gave birth to a goddess, an inspiration to thousands of women."

I tried to steady my breath, but the tears wouldn't stop.

"Now I'll be able to tell people how my mother looked," I said quietly.

He kissed my forehead. "Should I have it hung in our chamber?"

"Yes, yes, please," I replied eagerly, smiling through tears.

On impulse, I rose on my toes and kissed his cheek. "I love you so much. Please be mine in all seven lives, Hukum. I'll be happy to be born dark, sad, and lost in every life if it means having you in them. Please..."

He kissed my forehead and held me tightly. "I'm only meant for you, Aishwarya. Otherwise, how come not a single girl ever caught my interest?"

I chuckled, feeling his lips brush mine in a tender kiss.

After talking to him for a while, I returned to the courtyard, where everyone, especially Jiji, was waiting.

I immediately facepalmed, feeling shy under their gazes.

“To Devarani-sa, kaisi rahi Suhaagraat?” (So, sister-in-law, how was the wedding night?) she teased, and a wave of giggles swept through the area.

Heat rushed to my cheeks. “Jiji!” I shrieked, hiding my face in my palms.



Our consummation night became the topic of conversation for the next few days. I noticed the attendants smiling at me, some whispering, a few making faces.

But I loved it. I loved noticing people, and especially enjoyed seeing the reactions of those who had once spoken ill of me.

It felt as if I were on cloud nine, certain I could never be happier than this. Little did I know I would be even happier when the first meeting of the royal women was arranged.

After our union night, he hadn’t tried to come closer again, yet our distance had shrunk to almost nothing. As he’d said, he was waiting for me to ask for the next time.

I, however, was simply waiting for the meeting to be over.

Only three days were left, and all the designs were nearly complete, with final touches underway.

Suddenly, an attendant called, “Princess.”

I lifted my gaze from the paper where I was calculating the total cost of everything we had arranged.

“Ji,” I replied with a slight smile, noticing other attendants following her with large plates in their hands.

“All the stitching done?” I asked immediately, standing, and she nodded. “Perfect,” I said, feeling a flutter of nervousness stirring in my belly. “Keep them inside.”

I quickly began gathering my things in the library before heading to the bedroom.

“Where is Hukum?” I asked Moni.

“He went to meet Ranaji,” she replied.

I nodded and turned to the attendants. “Alright, you can go.” Looking at Moni, I added, “Can you ask Hukum to come here whenever he’s free? I think I’m getting nervous.”

She smiled and nodded before leaving.

I uncovered one plate and found a beautiful attire inspired by the peacock, even better than the one I had made for my sister.

The only thing I wasn't sure of was whether it would suit my complexion.

No, I didn't hate my skin colour. I was simply trying to find something that complemented it, and that, to me, was embracing it.

Picking up the attire, I went into the dressing room. Standing before the mirror, I began undressing and then stepped into the heavy lehenga.

Its special feature was the intricate mirror work, and so every time anyone wearing it would come in sunlight or moonlight, it would shimmer brilliantly, stealing all the attention.

I tied the skirt's knot around my waist, realising I had gained a little weight, maybe because of Hukum, or maybe because I was happier and hungrier. Perhaps also because I was working more.

Next, I put on the blouse, which I had asked the tailor to make with a single string and a smaller neckline so the shoulders would stay in place.

The mix of dark blue, gold, and deep green was something new for me. I inhaled deeply, unsure whether it was fit to present at the meeting.

"Aishwarya."

I heard Hukum's voice fade in as he entered the chamber. Quickly, I placed the dupatta on my head and stepped into the bedroom.

His eyes lit up the moment he saw me. "How is it, Hukum?" I asked.

"Beautiful... and unique," he said, watching me with a pleased expression.

"Does the colour suit me?" I asked, spinning a little.

"Of course. It's bold and creative," he replied.

"But isn't it too much? I mean... the dark colour with my dark complexion?" I asked, walking towards him.

He looked at me from head to toe, slowly. "Turn around." And I obeyed. "Put the dupatta down," he said, and I did, feeling his gaze linger on my back. "You look so appealing... extravagant," he murmured.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

He stood, walking behind me. I frowned slightly in confusion until I felt his fingers at my nape, undoing my braid. Slowly, he ran his fingers through my hair, guiding my head back.

He gathered my hair and began twisting it into a high bun.

"A bun?" I asked.

"Yes. Your peacock-like neck will catch attention," he replied, placing his index finger at my nape and trailing it down to the waistband of my skirt. "From here to there," he said, and heat rushed to my cheeks.

"Do you like them watching me?" I asked.

He kissed the side of my neck. "Yes. I want them to know how lucky I am, what I get to taste every day, and how beautiful my wife is."

I chuckled softly at his words.

"But I will keep the dupatta on my head, Hukum," I said, and he raised his brows.

"Oh? I thought it was just a woman's get-together," he replied, and I smiled.

"It is, but still... no matter how famous I become, I will always be the daughter-in-law of Suryagarh. And when everyone will be in dupattas, I will be too."

He deepened his kiss against my neck, making me gasp and tilt my face to the side.

"What's your age again?" he asked softly.

"Two hundred," I said, and we both laughed, and he kissed my cheek.

"I am proud of you, Aishwarya. So proud." His voice was suddenly serious.

I shook my head, placed my palm on his chest, and pushed him slightly away.

“Pride isn’t enough. I have to test the fit of these. So sit on the couch and tell me what looks good and what doesn’t.”

He smiled, holding my wrist, and kissed my knuckles.

“You know I have no sense about this.”

“But still, I must look better in some colours than others,” I said, narrowing my brows.

He shook his head like a little boy. “Any colour, and you look beautiful.”

“You forgot one,” I teased.

“What?”

“Without any colour.”

He chuckled. “Come on, don’t distract me. I know you will not ask for it.” He changed the topic, walking to the couch, and I smiled at him.

“I’ll be back,” I said.

“Wait, why walk here and there? I’ll come with you.”

Laughing softly, I moved toward the dressing room with him trailing behind me. I picked up the dresses, asking him to carry the rest. He locked the door behind us, and I began changing, showing him each piece I had created. His eyes held amazement, pride, and joy.

I had never been so happy.

In that moment, I realised I had never truly longed for love, support, or even emotions; I had longed for faith.

Faith is rarely spoken about. We talk of love, of support, of hope that things will be fine. But it all begins with faith.

Yadi vishwaas ho to paashaan mein bhi Prabhu ke darshan ho jaate hain (If there is faith, God reveals Himself even in a stone).

No one had ever believed in me. Over time, I began losing faith in myself. But that didn’t mean I was less competent, less deserving, or less hardworking. I was always capable, but he lit the fire of faith in me. He illuminated my world with belief in love, in my abilities, and in my worth.

And as I began to believe in myself, others started to believe in me too. The rest is history.

I saw his eyes glisten with each outfit I wore. In the beginning, I had mistaken his love and support for lust. But it had never been lust; it was love. Pure, unconditional love. And even if there was a hint of desire, I was proud that he had waited twenty years to offer it to his wife, whom he hadn't even seen before our marriage.

"You look beautiful," he said.

I giggled, glancing at my reflection. "I'm nervous."

He wrapped an arm around me and kissed my temple. "It's okay. Not all mountains have beautiful treks. Failures are our best teachers. Just have faith in yourself. Even if you fail, it doesn't mean you can't reach your destination. The path may just be different."

I swallowed, closing my eyes for a moment. "So... which one is final? Since it's Diwali night, everyone will be here. My sisters, my father, and Jiji's family. It's our first Diwali together, and I don't know what to wear."

He hummed softly, pretending to be deep in thought, and I spoke in a slow voice. "Dark brown?"

"Yes, please." He smiled, resting his chin on my shoulder.

I kissed his cheek. "Alright, I have to meet Jiji and discuss the remaining preparations."

"Alright," he said, letting me go.

I went to Jiji's courtyard and found her surrounded by attendants and ministers, briefing them about the celebration.

Actually, the plan had shifted. We were going to hold the meeting on Diwali itself, so all kingdoms and princely states could gather, not only for the festivities but also to discuss the suspected enemy beyond the mountains.

"Jiji," I called her.

Relief passed across her face as soon as she looked up.

"Oh, Aishwarya, thank goodness. I was waiting for you."

I sat beside her, taking the list she handed me. "So, are we only left with decoration, cleaning the guest chambers, and festival preparations?"

"Yes," she nodded.

"Don't worry, I'll handle the festival arrangements. Once the outfits arrive, everyone can choose theirs." I smiled at Suman and Moni. "I've arranged something special for both of you, too."

"Thank you, Princess," they said shyly.

"Nandani, I'll handle the chamber cleaning," Suman offered.

"Yes, and Devarsa is returning from Mehrgarh. Look after his chamber too," Jiji added.

"Just three days," Moni sighed.

"You know, Aishwarya, this is even bigger than Rudra's crowning ceremony. But I'm glad you're here with me to handle it," Jiji said, squeezing my hand.

"You should rest a little, Jiji. These gatherings can really overwhelm you."

"They do... it's just too much sometimes." She placed a hand over her heart.

"You're the Queen, Jiji, you'll be outstanding."

"Aww, Aishwarya, what did I do to deserve a sister like you?"

"Seduced Ranaji, I guess," I teased.

She playfully slapped my shoulder. "He seduced me, not the other way around."

We laughed together, then returned to preparing for Diwali, our big day.



36 Ranvijay

The Big Day.

It was a big day for my wife, my princess, and my cute baby. And I... was extremely late.

Moving quickly through the hallways toward our chambers, I offered polite smiles to guests along the way, though my mind was already racing ahead. My heartbeat quickened the moment I stepped inside. I knew she wanted everything to be perfect.

Not just her, Bhabhi-sa had told me firmly, not to be late under any circumstances.

"It wasn't my fault," I said the moment I entered our bedroom, catching sight of her darting from one end to the other. She froze mid-step, then turned to me with fiery eyes.

"I told you..." She strode toward me, taking furious steps, and I instinctively scurried toward the dressing room. "I told you to get ready on time. Everyone's waiting for the pooja... how could you be so irresponsible, Hukum?" Her voice followed me until I reached the dressing room, where a group of attendants stood waiting with her.

"My clothes?" I asked quietly.

"There? Anything other than white?" she asked, already half-distracted.

"No, white's perfect."

She gave a quick nod. "Alright, change fast. Jiji has sent three messages already, we're extremely late."

I glanced at the attendants still standing around. She noticed and then said, "Oh yes, please wait outside for a moment."

Once they left, I saw her fiddling with her bangles nervously. While changing, I said, "It'll be perfect, Aishwarya."

"I really hope so, Hukum." She exhaled slowly, then called out, "Moni, bring that shawl."

Moni appeared with a dark brown shawl matching Aishwarya's stunning outfit. She draped one end over my shoulder and the other across my arm. The fabric brushed warmly against me as she adjusted it from behind.

She slipped rings onto my fingers, then fetched the necklace. "Sit, please," she said anxiously, with a tinge of frustration palpable in her tone, and I sat silently.

She clasped the neckpiece around my throat, combed her fingers through my hair, and added a touch of perfume.

"Bring his footwear," she told Moni, before kneeling to place the footwear at my feet.

"You don't have—"

"Shhh, we're late," she cut me off.

I said nothing, slipping them on as she stood. "Let's go."

She was about to move toward the door, but I caught her wrist and pulled her back, pressing her against the dressing table.

"Huk—"

I didn't let her finish. My hand cupped her cheek, and tilting her face, I claimed her lips in a passionate, consuming kiss.

She gasped, resisting for a heartbeat, but melted into me, circling her arms around my torso. Slowly, I drew back. "Calm down, Aishwarya."

Her eyes softened, and she gave a small nod. "Ji."

I kissed her again, this time with gentle affection. "You look like a pure goddess today." And she did. She was glowing in a way I couldn't explain.

From head to toe, heavy jewellery adorned her, but what caught me was the light in her eyes.

"Thank you. Now, please, let's go," she said, pushing me lightly away but still holding my hand.

As we walked down the corridor, I remembered a time when she'd barely been able to meet my eyes. Now, she

was confident, proud... radiant.

She adjusted the dupatta over her head. Her jewellery chimed softly with each step. I caught the looks from the crowd, some admiring, some envious, and, as always, I welcomed both.

We reached the **Hawan** area just as Bhai-sa and Bhabhi-sa arrived from the opposite side. We waited for them to take their seats in the front row before settling in the second row, with Agastya between us.

The guests settled themselves in their seats, and the priest began the chants.

The entire pavilion buzzed with chanting, prayers, and the vibrant energy of the day.

After Bhai-sa and Bhabhi-sa completed their **Aahuti**, Aishwarya and I stepped forward with Agastya to offer ours. As I glanced at her chanting, I didn't know why, but pride welled up in me.

The same girl who once feared the crowd now sat among hundreds, looking more breathtaking than ever.

When the prayers ended, we took blessings from the priests, Bhai-sa, and Bhabhi-sa. She even bent to touch my feet after Bhabhi-sa touched Bhai-sa's. I didn't stop her; instead, I kissed her forehead. We then moved through the crowd, taking blessings from the rest of the family and relatives.

As the ceremony ended, food was served. I watched her walk off with Bhabhi-sa toward the ladies' pavilion. Her sisters joined her and received a warm welcome.

My baby was content.

Happy.

She had told me once that she didn't have to become like them to prove them wrong.

After lunch, the men gathered for friendly talks, discussions, and poetry, while the ladies enjoyed singing, dancing, and their own chatter. I knew I wouldn't get much time beside her.

As dusk approached, everyone began lighting **diyas**. Bhai-sa and I excused ourselves to help our wives.

When I entered our chamber, I found her placing small earthen lamps across the room.

"You here?" she asked, glancing at me.

I took the plate from the attendant. "You all should also decorate your rooms."

They smiled and slipped out, leaving us alone. The glow from the flames lit her face, making it impossible to look away.

"I excused myself for a while to decorate our home," I said, helping her place the diyas.

"Everything is going well?" I asked.

She smiled. "Yes. People are in awe of our designs, and Jiji keeps telling everyone I made them. She's saying we started a business and can create special designs for anyone who wants."

I set the plate down and looked at her silently. "We're all proud of you, Aishwarya."

She smiled and sat beside me. Her gaze drifted toward the garden as tears rolled down her cheeks.

"My sister said I'm so good... and they appreciated me," her voice shook as she poured out her emotions, and I immediately wrapped an arm around her.

"My father smiled at me, Hukum. I saw them trying to spend time with me, but Jiji wouldn't leave me alone. She was introducing me to everyone she knew." She broke into quiet sobs, and I rubbed her arms.

"You've come very far, baby."

She lifted her tearful eyes to mine. ***"Parivartan sansaar ka niyam hai, Hukum. Kintu aap kabhi na badliyega."*** (Change may be the way of the world, Hukum... but please, you must never change.)

I pulled her into my arms. "But ageing is a natural process, Aishwarya."

She chuckled and playfully fisted my kurta. "Hukum!"

Smiling, I brushed away her tears. "This is your night, Aishwarya. Be the brightest star today, so all the princes of every kingdom get jealous of me."

We continued decorating, filling the chamber with a warm golden light. Beyond our windows, the kingdom blazed with the glow of countless diyas, the same kingdom that had once lost its light was growing stronger roots.

"I need to go back, Hukum," she said.

"Of course." I kissed her fingers. "You proved yourself, Aishwarya."

She smiled faintly. "And I realised I never needed to. Those people were never mine. But still... I feel content."

She wrapped an arm around me. "Don't stay up too late if I get caught up in chatting."

I stroked her hair and walked her toward the ladies' pavilion. Inside, they were singing, dancing, and laughing. One of her sisters ran over and pulled her into the centre.

I stood there, watching my life, giggling and laughing, moving her tiny waist with pride and confidence. My chest grew heavy, and a tear of joy slipped down my cheek.

She danced without hesitation, with no trace of shyness. The women around her gossiped, smiled, and enjoyed themselves.

Some people never change. But she had given up expecting them to.

Her eyes suddenly met mine mid-dance. A faint shyness touched her expression, and I instinctively rolled my hand in a protective gesture, touching my forehead to guard her from the evil eye.

My life wasn't bad before her. But she had made it to heaven.

I turned and walked back toward the men's gathering for dinner.



The talks continued late into the night. After that, I returned to my chamber and lay in the courtyard, gazing at the magnificent view of high walls and lush greenery through the open space.

It was growing dark, and with a no-moon night, the sight felt even more striking.

I felt tired after so much conversation, and the silence was a peaceful relief.

“Hukum, should I get you something?” an attendant asked.

I shook my head. “No, thank you,” I replied, and she bowed and left. I waited quietly for my wife, eager to hear her stories, though I didn’t realise when sleep took over.

I woke suddenly to the sound of soft giggles and the patter of footsteps entering.

Perhaps she needed the attendants’ help to change.

“Jaag rahein hain abhi aap?” (You are still up?) she asked, looking at me. My eyes drifted to the attendants behind her, unsure how to respond.

“You all can go and rest,” she told them, and they left with warm smiles.

“How was everything?” I asked, resting a hand beneath my head.

“It was all good. I don’t know much about business and finance, but people are suddenly very good to me. It feels surreal,” she said, undoing her dupatta and slipping it off.

I couldn’t help but admire her, standing in her deep brown, heavy attire, adorned with jewellery from head to toe. She must have noticed my gaze, for she tossed her dupatta slowly over my face. I caught it instantly and smiled.

“You are looking beautiful, Aishwarya,” I said. She smiled and stepped out of her footwear.

“Really?” she teased, drawing the curtains of the courtyard’s entrance.

“Aren’t you tired?” I asked as she began removing her heavy earrings.

She shook her head. “Never tired for us, Hukum.”

I kept her dupatta in my hand. “So, want to talk?” I asked softly.

She gave me an intense look, smiling shyly as her fingers moved to the clasps of her necklaces, removing them one by one.

“Maybe,” she murmured, continuing until she paused at her bangles. “Do you mind if I take them off for one night?” she asked hesitantly.

“No,” I replied. She inhaled deeply and slid off the heavy set. I saw how visibly relaxed she was after that.

Kneeling, she placed them in the carpet’s corner beside me. As I watched her closely, she gave me a faint smile and slipped on a simple pair of gold bangles.

“They seem weightless now,” I said quietly.

“I love their weight,” she replied, standing to remove the ornaments from her hair and loosening her bun.

Once all her jewellery, except the gold bangles and toe rings, was gone, she inhaled deeply and came to sit beside me.

She placed her hand and head on my chest. “I love you, Hukum,” she whispered.

I wrapped an arm around her. “Is everything okay, baby?” I asked. She breathed in deeply before looking at me.

“I don’t know... but today I felt we have so much work to do, and so little time to spend together.”

“That’s how we balance our duties and desires, Aishwarya,” I said, and she nodded, pressing a kiss to my chest.

“Are you tired?” she asked softly, sitting up halfway. Her hair cascaded to one side, brushing over my chest. I shook my head.

She smiled and leaned down to place another kiss on my chest. Her small hands worked slowly on the strings of my

kurta before pressing her lips there again.

The sight of her trying to push her hair back from the side of her face mesmerised me.

My lips curved into a light smile as I gently caressed her cheek, sliding a layer of her hair away.

With her fuller lips, she placed a warm, soft kiss on my chest and moved up, closer to my face.

Before I could even decipher what was happening, she pressed her lips over mine. The abrupt movement surprised me, but as soon as her kiss intensified, I breathed back to reality.

As she sucked my lips like a starved woman, my eyes squeezed shut, and my hand slid up to her hair, gently stroking it. She guided my hand to her waist with pure urge before I could even reach up to hold her by her cheek.

Pressing more of herself to me, she devoured my mouth as if she were eating me raw.

“Baby.” A low, throaty groan slipped past my lips.

Her eyes met mine as her hand fumbled with the hem of my kurta. She pulled it off in one go, and I straightened slightly to discard it.

The air in the chamber thickened with our heat. She again placed her lips on my cheek, leaving a trail of wet, urgent kisses. Her hand descended, untying the knot of my lower garment, and she slowly slid her hand inside.

I inhaled deeply, feeling her tiny, warm hands brushing my already heated arousal.

She pulled her lips away for a moment and focused on me, holding my erection in both her hands.

As she was about to lean low, a grunt erupted in my throat, and I tried to stop her.

“Aishwarya—”

But before I could even call or stop her, she kissed the most sensitive part of me, making my chest rise and fall at a rapid pace.

“Oh my goodness...” My heart thudded heavily in my chest, and my breathing turned uneven when she darted out her tongue and gave a tiny lick to the tip of my arousal.

Slowly, she opened her mouth wide and took it in. Her lips around my heat felt even warmer and more pleasing; it bulged out further.

“Should I take it deeper?” she asked in a low whisper.

“Whatever you want.” I tried to form words, but my voice came out more desperate and trembling.

She smiled and opened her mouth wider, taking in more.

Such heavenly pleasure forced me to shut my eyes.

Taking her time, at a steadier pace, she kissed it, sucked it, and licked it, locking her gaze with mine. And I died there.

Her tongue licking my length, her kohl-filled, dark, captivating eyes on me. Everything about her in that moment turned my arousal even harder.

It was game over for me, and I knew that and gladly surrendered to that feeling.

She smiled at my reaction and spat at my hard-on, and my eyes froze on her. My heart slipped from its place for a moment when she drew her hand back and rose to her feet.

With her gaze fixed on mine, her hands reached behind and she pulled the strings of her blouse, pushing the sleeves down her shoulders.

While she worked on her lehenga’s strings, I removed my lower garment completely.

She moved closer and straddled me on my lap, parting her legs, dangling them on either side of me.

“Should I take it in?” she asked, placing her hands over my chest, balancing herself. Though her words came out more like an uneven breath, she didn’t give in to her nervousness.

“Spit on it,” I instructed slowly.

She creased her brows together, and I nodded, assuring her.

I watched my baby shift slightly, just enough to do what I had asked, obediently.

“Now?” she asked, and I nodded again.

She softly guided the tip of my arousal to her entrance, and her brows knitted together as she eventually pushed herself down.

A low, breathy moan escaped her lips, and my mouth opened wide, feeling her tightness clench around me.

The dry warmth was suffocatingly painful in the beginning, yet listening to her faltering moans and seeing her enjoy that pain diverted my mind to peak insanity.

Her head fell back as she moved herself against me, taking all of it. I held her thighs to contain myself and keep a leash on my urge to take charge.

Breathing heavily, she tried adjusting to my size. A tear glistened at the corner of her eye, and she placed both her palms on my chest for support and began moving back and forth, pounding against me. Her long hair rubbed against my thighs as she moved relentlessly.

My eyes fell on her erect nipples, and I palmed one of them.

Under the flickering golden light of the lamps, her bare, raw form radiated beautifully while she rode me shamelessly.

I relaxed, resting my head back on my arm, watching my wife take pleasure from me.

The sight of her moving slowly, then pacing up, then slowing down again as she neared her release, yearning to let it out, was appealing to my eyes.

She tried numerous times, and by the end, she was left with exhaustion, not satisfaction.

I was edgy, and she, too, was trying hard to have her release.

She leaned in, kissing me harshly while attempting to move as fast as she could. And seeing my wife struggle, I

couldn't help but wrap my arms around her waist and help her move against me.

Her moans grew louder, echoing in the courtyard, driving me insane with desire for her.

As the heat intensified between us, she straightened again, and her head fell back in pleasure.

"Oh, baby," I groaned, closing my eyes as she rode me harder and faster. "Slower, Aishwarya, please."

"No, Hukum, no, please," she whimpered, her voice dripping with pure ecstasy.

I held her thighs hard and rolled my head back. "Baby, I won't last much longer. I'm close," I grunted as her pace shifted to an extreme level.

Suddenly, I felt her warmth coating me.

I went even more insane coming inside her. We were both gasping hard, trying to catch our breath. Yet, she kept moving against me until she drew out the last drop of me, then fell tiredly onto my chest.

I wrapped her in my arms, with our legs entangled.

"You are all mine, Prince Ranvijay Dev Singh," she mumbled in a weary tone.

I smiled, kissing her forehead. "I'm all yours, Princess."



Epilogue

Year 1655

My life had changed drastically when my father had tied me into a political alliance with the Prince of Suryagarh.

Like any other woman, I too was frightened to leave my home. I was terrified to step into someone else's life, having no clue what my future would hold.

My world turned upside down in only a few months.

I became his, but little did I realise that he also became mine.

And my entire story was about learning that truth, that he was mine. Mine in the truest sense of exclusivity. Not only through marital rituals but also through emotions, love, care, and unwavering support.

He became mine.

After marriage, I discovered parts of myself I had never known in the nineteen years before I met him. He revealed the true Aishwarya before my very eyes. Through him, I found myself.

The business flourished and helped immensely with the construction of shelters for the poor on the outskirts. His hard work bore fruit, too, as Ranaji entrusted him with another project of developing the hundred acres surrounding the kingdom into a well-planned village. Employment, education, and happiness grew.

But there was one thing that never changed... him.

His authority over me remained the same. One word from him in his firm voice, and I would grow timid.

Whenever he called my name, 'Aishwarya,' I would come running like a bird. His smiles whenever I lingered around, the way he lifted his gaze whenever I entered our chamber,

his patience in waiting late at night if I overworked... And in return, I wouldn't sleep until I saw his face.

He was the keeper of my life, the one who freed me from my cage and let me fly high, always believing that I belonged to him.

Where many husbands feel jealous seeing their wives grow, my husband was proud and happy when my name spread across Indira, and when our exports reached distant continents.

I never knew this strength was inside me, honestly.

If someone had told the young Aishwarya that she would achieve all this, she definitely would have laughed shyly.

But he was my lucky charm.

I gazed down at the paper and ink, beginning to pen yet another letter for my Hukum, who was away on one of his tours, as he often was every few months. Letters had become our bridge.

“Khammaghani Hukum,

Mahal mein sab accha chal raha hai aur hum bhi theek hain. Aasha hai ki aap bhi swastha honge.

Aaj savere hi aapka patra mila. Achha laga yah jaankar ki aapka kaarya sheegra hi poorn ho jaayega. Hum aapki prateeksha kar rahein hain, va har kshan aapki smriti humein satati rehti hai.

Hukum, aapko pata hai, Moni ne putra ko janm diya hai. Hum atyant prasanna hain. Kintu Jiji ka swaasthya kuch theek nahi lag raha. Ek-do baar to ve moorcchit bhi ho gayin thi. Humne salaah di ki vaidya ko dikhaaye, to kaarya mein vyast hai kehkar baat taal di.

Ranaji bhi achhe hain. Devar-sa humaari sahaayata to karte hi hain, kintu bahut hasaate bhi hain humein. Unke kaaran to kayi baar hum aapko smaran bhi nahi karte. Aaj to keh rahein the, ki kisi din humein jamaalghota pila denge kyunki hum unse bahut kaarya karwaate hain.

Aur to sab kushal-mangal hai. Aap muskura denge to humein acha lagega. Acha ab vida lete hain, sheegra aapse bhent hogi.

***Aapki,
Aishwarya."***

(Greetings, Hukum,

All is well within the palace, and I am also fine. I hope you are in good health as well.

I received your letter this morning. It was good to know you would soon finish your work. I am waiting for you, and I miss you.

Hukum, you know Moni is blessed with a son. I'm overjoyed. Yet, I worry about Jiji, whose health does not seem very good. She has even fainted once or twice. I advised her to consult a physician, but she brushed it aside, saying she was busy with work.

Ranaji is well too. Devar-sa not only helps me but also makes me laugh a lot. Because of him, at times, I don't even think of you. Just today, he was even joking that one day he would add some potion to my food because I burden him with too many tasks.

All else remains well. It would make me happy to see your smile once more. And so, I take my leave for now, hoping we shall meet again soon.

Yours,
Aishwarya.)

I finished and rolled the letter to send it. But suddenly...

"Aishwarya."

I lifted my gaze instantly and screamed.

"Hukum!!!"

A wide smile broke across my face as I rushed into his arms, and he held me tightly.

"How is my baby?" he asked, pressing a kiss to my temple.

"As you left me," I whispered, when suddenly the voice of an attendant interrupted.

“Prince, Princess, Rani-sa is asking for you,” she said.

I furrowed my brow. “Both of us?” I asked in confusion, and she nodded in response. “Ji.”

He looked puzzled too, and I said, “Okay.”

“Let’s meet her first,” he said, holding my hand.

We walked together, and I noticed Devar-sa was also heading towards her chamber. Inside Jiji’s guest chamber, I found her sitting on the couch. As soon as we stepped in, our gazes met.

“Aishwarya, come here,” she said, and I immediately let go of his hand and walked to her.

“Ji, jiji?” I asked, and she leaned close to my ear, whispering, “I have to tell you something important. I think I am... expecting.”

My brows furrowed slightly. Her eyes softened, and suddenly I heard Ranaji’s voice.

“What happened, Nandani?”

We both stood up at once, startled as he entered the chamber.

“Why did you call everyone?” he asked, stepping closer. “Are you okay, little bird?” He had always called her that.

I quietly walked back to Hukum’s side. She looked around at all of us and said, “So, I guess you are all going to get promotions.”

I frowned in confusion.

“What? I am the king. What promotion can I get?” Ranaji asked with a short laugh. But then his eyes widened, and his face turned pale. “Promotion???” he repeated, stunned.

I glanced at Hukum, whose eyes had also gone wide, and then at Devar-sa, who reacted the same way.

“Promotion?????” they both screamed together, while I stood there feeling foolish.

Jiji nodded timidly. In the next moment, Ranaji lifted her in his arms, shouting, “Oh my goodness, I’m going to become a father!”

A shiver rushed through me.

“Oh my God!”

“It’s a girl, it’s a girl, I know it!” Devar-sa exclaimed, already dancing. Hukum pulled me into a tight embrace, beaming.

“We’re going to become uncle and aunt, Aishwarya.”

A wide smile spread across my face. For a moment, I felt numb. His earlier words about pain and holes echoed faintly in my mind, but then I saw Jiji giggling with joy.

“Congratulations, Bhai-sa and Bhabhi-sa,” Hukum said warmly, and I too smiled.

“Yes, congratulations... oh my God!”

It was truly the moment of the year. We spent the day laughing, eating, and talking with Jiji and Ranaji. I mostly listened, whispering, but the happiness was overwhelming.

Yet, this was not the end, not in our story, nor in Suryagarh’s. We were all waiting for the third bride of Suryagarh, who would complete us.

After the news from Jiji, our responsibilities only grew, but so did our love, which never faded even for a single day.

The joy touched each of us differently, especially me. I felt our bonds strengthen as responsibility deepened. I hugged Jiji, and she kissed my cheek lovingly, as always.

“**Kaaki-sa**,” (Aunt) she teased, and I chuckled, hugging her tightly.

“Oh my God!” Tears pricked my eyes.

I looked at Hukum holding my hands when Jiji smiled mischievously. “You should also start trying now,” she said.

Heat rushed to my cheeks. “Ji...” I whispered shyly, glancing at Hukum.

That night, after dinner, we returned to our chamber, and as always after his tours, he devoured every inch of me. In those three days, he had taken me in every possible corner of our chamber. I went insane when he put me on all fours and took me from behind.

One night, he pressed me against the wall, lifted me to wrap my legs around him, and drove me mad with desire.

Day by day, I was falling in love with him even more.

He never tried to change me. He knew I was brown, and he accepted me as I was, teaching me to love the brown too.

I was proud of myself. I was proud to be called the Prince's Brown Bride.

Mrs. Aishwarya Ranvijay Dev Singh, in love with Hukum. That was everything to me. A friend, a lover, a husband, and everything a woman could ask for.

"Hukum."

"Yes, baby."

This would never grow old for me. But I was ready to grow old with him.

And for both of us, it was a happily ever after.



Sumanika

Aman dragged me to the centre.

The cries of his family froze my body. Yet, a stronger cyclone was brewing inside me.

I felt entirely lifeless—death—closer than ever.

Life had always been dull, but I never imagined my end like this, to which I contributed nothing. Yet I would be lying on the pyre—all alive—only because I'd taken the seven holy rounds around the sacred fire.

I didn't know who he was. He never spoke to me or cared whether I was well-fed, slept, alive, or dead.

In these twenty-three years of life, he never considered me his wife. He loved his mistress, but upon his death, I was called to hug him on his deathbed and let the intense, scorching flames of fire sear my skin until I melted and died. Non-consensually.

The tears fell from my eyes, not because my husband had died, but because I saw my remaining hope subside.

This world hated to see me happy. God knew what destiny had for me.

My family married me off at sixteen to a man double my age, who only cared to get between my legs. And after he was done ruining every inch of me, he went to someone else.

I compromised with that, my life—focused ahead, but they couldn't help and called me to mourn his death.

But, Little did I know of their intention of pushing me to his pyre of the end, as our customs and traditions couldn't see a left woman live her life on her own and at her best.

The shutter of my eyes closed as four young men, seemingly sensible, tied my hands, added flowers, decorated the final bed of the deceased, and laid me—an

offering for the man I wholeheartedly hated—to play with, even in the next of his lives.

Why?

Why did you make me a woman?

Why did you even give me a life?

Was I that terrible?

Did I deserve all this?

I broke into the cries, my screams louder than the mourners, mentally preparing myself to break all the worldly ties.

Yet, the cries of my soul, feared to be burnt alive, forced my hands, my fingers stretching tight, “Ahh,” groaning in pain to get rid of the rope of binds.

“Please! I beg you, please don’t do this! Please,” my voice broke, vision blurred, skin sweated, nose filled with incense and flowers, signifying the end of the last ritual, beginning the end of mine.

“Please, I don’t want to die,” I screamed. The noise of his father’s footsteps approaching closer with a water pot hanging bent on his shoulder, eyes filled with tears, heart deprived of humanity, and mind washed for traditions, filled my ears.

I shook my head, moved my legs, and raked my eyes, searching for the hope, a spark, a breath of care for a life.

I knew I was no one. But, I was someone!

There was a soul inside me—memories, experiences, people, smiles, and pride. Weren’t there any among the tribe?

His father marched around the pyre, spilling the water.

I called, begged, and preached, “Please, I beg you, please. He left me alone. I am no longer his wife. He never considered me one. Please, please, I am begging you, leave me, please,” unable to settle that I was about to die.

He left the pot, breaking it into pieces, sending shivers down my body and raising the chills in my mind.

I cried.

Cried louder.

My screams penetrated through the thick silence, waiting to be filled with the smoke of a live burn, unable to reach the deaf ears around me.

My soul hid somewhere deep, trembling and wheezing, flooding my mind with memories of Nandani, Daadisa, and everyone who was, and even those who weren't, my home.

I didn't want to die. Not like this. What was my mistake?

"Please, I am begging you, please, leave me, please," my cries only grew louder, my throat burning, the ropes leaving marks on my wrists. But their souls were darker than the devils.

They do this and still ask why cataclysm happens.

"Please, someone help, please, leave me," the base of my hair filled with sweat, noticing his father grabbing the burning wood and lightening someone alive and dead.

I hastened, stretching myself. My ankles grazed against the jute, my pleas worrisome—feared.

But amid the noise, I heard the fire breaking under me; the smoke erupting, clouding, hiding, forcing, enveloping, and finally welcoming me.

"Please, I am begging you, please, do not do it." I screamed, shattered.

The glasses are lucky—at least they get picked up and thrown comfortably. I was being crushed, silenced, and burnt.

My eyes closed. Misery surrounds me. My body was giving up, and my senses were failing.

Yet my soul screamed.

To be free.

"Please," I shrieked. "Ahhhhhh," heat dragging me, "Leave me please," I begged. Hardly audible. "I will kill you; leave me!" I even threatened.

But no one.

No one was alive.

If god loved the dead more than the alive, why did he make breathing so divine?

The sky, the trees, the dawn—everything was watching. The winds, the hiding sun, and the impatience of birds signify nature's crying.

And people—they stood dead. Enjoying.

I screeched, "Please, someone save me, please," one last time before the coughs clogged me, smoke puffed my chest, and flames shortened my breath.

One side of the pyre had caught fire. My braid lay inches away. My body numbed, feeling the heat searing at the mound's bottom.

It hurt, "I am begging you, please leave me. I will do as you all say. I will never show my face to anyone." But I only screamed.

I screamed with everything I had. "Pleaseeeeeee,"

No one listened, so I had to prepare for my heavenly abode.

My clothes would catch fire, my skin would melt, my braid burn, a symphony of yelps would begin, and the thunder of screams would erupt, scorching my cheeks, taking my eyes, thinning me to bones, and finally claiming my soul.

But.

"What the hell is happening here?" a loud voice said, sending chills down my spine. It gave birth to my hopes, a living me from my grave.



Glossary

1. Chaturanga: The earliest known form of chess originated in the Indian subcontinent.
2. Bhai-sa: 'Bhai' means brother, with 'sa' being a suffix that shows respect.
3. Bhabhi-sa: Sister-in-law.
4. Kalash: A pot, particularly a metal or earthenware.
5. Mehendi: "Henna", a natural reddish-brown dye derived from the leaves of the henna plant.
6. Mahavar: "Alta", a traditional red dye used by women to adorn their feet.
7. Choti Rani-sa: A young queen.
8. Badi-maa: One's father's elder brother's wife.
9. Devar-sa: Brother-in-law [Husband's younger brother].
10. Ranaji: A historical title for a king, and 'ji' is used to show respect.
11. Lehenga: A long, decorative skirt.
12. Kunwar-sa: A prince.
13. Bai-sa: A respectful term used for a royal woman, or any woman in general.
14. Devrani-sa: Sister-in-law [Husband's younger brother's wife].
15. Jiji: Sister.
16. Dal-baati-choorma: A Rajasthani meal, with 'Dal' being a lentil curry, 'Baati' being the wheat bread balls, and 'Choorma' being a dessert prepared by mixing the baati, jaggery, and clarified butter.
17. Rani-sa: Queen.
18. Dupatta: A long scarf or shawl.
19. Hukum: This word in English means order, command or a decree, but it is also used to denote a directive

or a superior's instruction that must be obeyed.

20. Kuldevi: This word is a combination of two words, 'kul' and 'devi'. Where 'kul' means family or clan, 'devi' means goddess. So together it means family goddess.
21. Gurudev: Teacher.
22. Annapurna: A goddess of food and nourishment.
23. Lakshmi: The goddess of wealth, prosperity, fortune, and beauty.
24. Parvati: Consort of Shiva, and the daughter of the mountains. The name comes from the Sanskrit word 'parvat', which means mountains.
25. Durga: The invincible warrior goddess.
26. Saraswati: Goddess of knowledge, wisdom, music, and the arts.
27. Roti: Indian flat bread.
28. Prahar: Hour.
29. Jhumka: A kind of earring that resembles a small bell.
30. Pranaam: Greeting.
31. Jawai-sa: Son-in-law.
32. Baapu-sa: Father.
33. Hookah: A water pipe used to smoke.
34. Maasimaa: Aunt.
35. Teej: A festival observed by women to celebrate nature, welcome the monsoon, and pray for the well-being of their husbands and marital bliss.
36. Thali: Plate.
37. Ghee: Clarified butter.
38. Rangoli: Traditional Indian decoration and patterns made with ground rice.
39. Saawan: Fifth month of the Hindu calendar, known as the monsoon or rainy season in India.
40. Mala: A decorative string or chain of flowers, or other items such as pearls.

41. Latkan: A decorative tassel or pendant that hangs from clothing, jewellery, or other objects.
42. Vaidya: A practitioner of ayurvedic medicine.
43. Gurukul: A traditional residential school.
44. Diwali: A festival of lights.
45. Hawan: A fire ceremony, offering substance to a sacred fire to invoke blessings and fulfil desires.
46. Aahuti: Offerings in the Hawan fire.
47. Diya: A small oil lamp, made of clay.
48. Kaaki-sa: Aunt [Father's younger brother's wife].

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Books in the MHU universe

First generation

1. **Abhishree ~ The Queen of Mahabaleshgarh**
2. **Bride of Sultan ~ The Bleeding Rose**

Second generation

3. **Ruhani ~ The language of love**
4. **Rudra Nandani ~ The saga of control and seduction**
5. **Aishwarya ~ The Prince's Brown Bride**
6. **Sumanika ~ The prince's Widowed Bride**
7. **Trishalini ~ The Jewel of Mahabaleshgarh**
8. **Bride of Sultan ~ The Forgotten Rose**
9. **Haider's Ghazal ~ The Amir's Crushed Rose**

Extras

1. **The Commander's Wrath**
2. **Hrutvika ~ The Peshwa's Thick Bride**

Third generation

Books dedicated to the children of second-generation characters' Names will be announced in time on official pages.

Books in the 'The billionaire's Saga' Universe

- 1. The Billionaire's Secret**
- 2. The Billionaire's Secretary**
- 3. The Billionaire's Bully**

Thanks!

Namrata
Himani
Yash
Jyoti
Aditi
Varnita
Akansha
Ananya
Disha
Doyel
Geetika
Jasleen
Jiya
Khushee
Naina
Neha
Praapti
Priyanshi
Ruhi
Saina
Samruddhi
Shagun
Shree
Shreya
Srushti
Tanya
Trina
Trisha
Shriti
Sejal
Aastha

Sorry if I forgot any names; it would be unintentional.